

Japanese

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Materials set 1 – *Anime* background notes



Curriculum K–12 Directorate

The logo for the Association of Independent Schools of NSW, featuring the text 'ais nsw' in a stylized font with a circular graphic element.



Materials set 1 – *Anime* background notes

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千と千尋の神隠し - Spirited Away

Contents

Stylistic analysis of <i>Spirited Away</i>	3
1. Notes on <i>anime</i> form	3
2. <i>Anime</i> analysis checklist	5
3. Detailed analysis of prescribed extracts	15
Glossary of terminology	22
Analysis of issues in <i>Spirited Away</i>	23
The <i>shojo</i> (Issue: The search for identity)	24
The role of parents and the theme of nurturing (Issue: Relationships)	26
Consumerism and Japan's disappearing traditional values (Issue: The impact of change on society)	29
The power of words and names (Issue: The search for identity)	31
Japan's national identity (Issue: The search for identity)	33

Stylistic analysis of *Spirited Away*

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Spirited Away (2001) is one of the most acclaimed and successful productions of the Japanese production company Studio Ghibli and its director Hayao Miyazaki. This critical and commercial success both in Japan and internationally includes winning the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in 2003 and becoming the highest grossing film in Japanese cinema history—not just for animated films but for all films and not just of Japanese films but of Hollywood films including *Titanic*. Another of Miyazaki's films, *Princess Mononoke*, is the third highest. Other Studio Ghibli films include *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Laputa the Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Porco Rosso* (1992), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) all by Miyazaki, and *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and *My Neighbours The Yamadas* (1999) by Miyazaki's colleague Isao Takahata.

A **glossary of terminology** is provided at the end of the article.

1. Notes on *anime* form

Spirited Away is an example of the film form known as *anime*. *Anime* is the word that the Japanese use for all animation no matter which country it is produced in, but for the rest of the world it has become a global word for Japanese made animation and an emerging and essential part of Western popular culture for many young people. The notion of animation existed prior to *anime*. The essential words, defined by the Macquarie Dictionary, are as follows:

<i>animate-</i>	<i>to give life to;</i> <i>to make alive;</i> <i>to cause to appear or move as if alive, as in an animated cartoon</i>
<i>animation-</i>	<i>animated quality; liveliness;</i> <i>vivacity; spirit; life;</i> <i>the act of animating; act of enlivening;</i> <i>the process of preparing animated cartoons.</i>

1.1 Animism

Miyazaki's films tend to make extensive use of animism. Animism is part of Japan's indigenous religion Shinto. Russian film director and film theorist Sergei M. Eisenstein described animism as the belief that all objects possess a natural life or vital force or that they are endowed with an indwelling spirit, usually used to designate the most primitive and superstitious forms of religion. He saw in animation the perpetuation of the spirit of animism both as a belief and as a practice:

The very idea of the animated cartoon is like a direct embodiment of the method of animism. Whether a momentary supplying of an inanimate object with life

and a soul, which we also preserve when we bump into a chair and curse it as though it were a living being, or whether a long-term supplying with life, with which primitive man endows inanimate nature.

In the light of Eisenstein's theoretical contributions, animism can be seen as an essential element in the analysis and theorising of animation. One can readily see the association that Miyazaki's films *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbour Totoro* have with the notions of animism and the existence of a spirit world in nature. Miyazaki's *anime* also contain many examples of metamorphosis, another element of animation.

1.2 Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis is a technique fundamental to animation practice and to the thinking of animation. It is a transition device in which one image, or part of an image, may be transformed into a completely different image such as Chihiro's parents turning into pigs. This special feature of animation and *anime* can be used as a narrative device to advance the story and until the recent developments in the marriage of live-action film special effects with digital animation, technology metamorphosis was unique to animation film. This process may be combined with the flexibility of a character or object's materiality, known as its plasticity.

1.3 Plasticity

An important enabling factor in animation is plasticity of form. What Eisenstein describes as the *liberation of forms from the laws of logic* applies to the sheer flexibility of line found in animation, that shifting boundary capable of stretching and squashing, as animators label the technique, into any possible form, so that any object or character is not limited by its own form. Its design is pliable. Kamajii's extendable arms are an example of this. In animation the pliable shapes are capable of assuming any form and usually do so as the process of metamorphosis is commonly employed. Like the character Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland*, the characters and objects of the *anime* realm can achieve the impossible. This is a reaction against the real world where everything is fixed, solid and stable, and a shift into the dream world where things can float, wilt and wobble, breaking free of reality's restrictions. The practice of metamorphosis in animation allows the expression of this plasticity in animation as well as the practice of an animated design disintegrating or being destroyed then reassembling itself and reverting back to its original shape.

1.4 Graphic tradition

The Macquarie Dictionary has an entry for *anime: manga movie* that in turn is defined as *a Japanese animated movie, made in the style of the Japanese comic books*. This association with *manga*, the comic books of Japan, is important in that it points to a graphic commonality as both *anime* and *manga* are heavily based on artwork. They are art based, graphic mediums that are linked to a graphic heritage that existed long before the invention of the cinema and that include painted

scrolls, woodblock prints and posters, and one that continues to the present day as a source of stories and styles for *anime*. Many *manga* feature extended stories of 200-400 pages in length in graphic narrative form, similar to graphic novels from Europe and North America in approach but not in style or scale. They also provide the springboard for development of these graphic stories from print to screen via production as film for cinema or series for television. Their visual style is a huge creative influence on *anime*. Many creative artists make the transition from *manga* artist to *anime* director. Miyazaki himself has worked both in *manga* and *anime*, originally drawing a *manga* version of his story *Nausicaa* before developing it into *anime* form as *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984).

1.5 A genre of film

Animation is seen as a genre of film, sometimes called film animation and *anime* is referred to as a genre of animation. On closer inspection, however, *anime* is too diverse with such a wide variety of styles to be defined in one category due to its multi-generic nature having many sub-genres and cross-genres of its own, not unlike the breadth of film genres. The *anime* sub-genres may even be split or mixed into intertextual form called cross-genres. These may target specific audiences desirous of such works. In the case of *Spirited Away* is it fantasy genre or *shojo* or science fiction or romance or combinations of two or more of these? And transcending genre studies Miyazaki, through his own body of work, may also be seen more as an *auteur*, in the French sense, and less of a genre director.

1.6 Film technique

In addition to *anime's* connection with *manga* there is the influence of film. Besides its incorporation of graphic techniques it employs film technique. It does differ in some respects to live-action filmmaking in that the images are drawn rather than created by normal cinematographic procedures, in which the story is acted out by actors who are costumed, lit and photographed. The drawn images of an animated film may be recorded by a film camera but these are done frame by frame with pauses between shots. In many instances today digital animation has replaced the traditional optical/mechanical process but the animated scenes may imitate live-action cinematographic processes by introducing cinematic style lighting, camera-work and editing. So there is both a graphic influence and a film influence. Miyazaki must manipulate both a pencil and a camera and, as director, when it comes to obtaining dramatic performances from his cast, he has to actually act through his pencil, drawing the performances in addition to directing the real actors who supply the vocal tracks.

2. *Anime* analysis checklist

For the purposes of attempting to comprehend *anime* a technique of layered structural analysis has been developed and employed in these notes. The elements of *anime* have been divided into three layers: the story, structure and direction, the soundtrack and the image. These three have been further separated into sub-

layers. There is, however, the possibility of the cross-linking or coordination of the layers. The very nature of an intertextual medium such as *anime* means that boundaries separating one category from another may be easily crossed. The acting, as mentioned for instance, consists of a drawn performance by an animator married to a voice dubbed recording by an actor. This performance can be coloured by the addition of music, the style of costume and setting, and the tempo and editing of the scene. At whichever point one starts to analyse the *anime* the various elements and components that have been designed and used to construct the scene can be unravelled to a considerable degree.

Elements of *anime* and animation

Story, structure and direction

- Narrative
- Structure
- Resolution
- Genre/ sub-genre/ cross-genre or *auteur* style
- Characterisation
- Acting and performance
- Direction

Soundtrack

- Music (instrumentation and musical arrangement)
- Speech, dialogue and narration
- Sound effects

Image

- **Art and design**
 - graphic and visual style including experimentation and choice of media e.g. acrylic, oil, water colour, *gouache*, pastel, crayon, charcoal, pencil, calligraphy brush, collage, cut-outs, objects such as dolls, puppets, toys, and photography
 - character design
 - sets and visual space
 - costumes
 - props
 - make-up
 - titles
 - special visual effects

- **Animation**
 - technique/technology employed (rotoscoping/ pixillation/ claymation/ stop motion/ drawn/ digital 2D or 3D, puppet, cut-out, plasticine, cell, painting or drawing on paper, sand on backlit glass, coloured pencil)
 - animism/ anthropomorphism/ metamorphism/ plasticity
 - visual metaphor (literal or symbolic)
 - synchronisation/ fusion of animated image and soundtrack
 - movement (quality of, style of, tempo, expression through movement)
- **Film and video technique**
 - cinematography including framing, angle and shot composition
 - lighting
 - visual effects
 - editing

2.1 Story, structure and direction

- Narrative
- Structure
- Resolution
- Genre/ sub-genre/ cross-genre or *auteur* style
- Characterisation
- Acting and performance
- Direction

The story is like a dream that Chihiro has, a mystery, even a fairy tale that she experiences. It consists of the creation of a fantasy world populated by gods and spirits, not the traditional *youkai* variety of spirits drawn from Shinto philosophy but more from Miyazaki's imagination. The *youkai* are spirits that are mutations of humans, animals or plants and usually appear at dawn or dusk at the crossroads of the human and spirit worlds. They form part of Shinto and of Taoist philosophies and are represented in ghost stories and in the art of the Edo period. Mononoke, a form of *youkai*, appear in Miyazaki's earlier film *Princess Mononoke*. *Kappa*, the water spirit, is another example.

The narrative is structured around a series of confrontations that Chihiro/Sen has and are resolved when she eventually emerges having experienced considerable personal development and maturity. It is a story of the independent woman. At the start of the film Chihiro is frightened and reluctant to face her fears but she manages to do so with increasing nerve and confidence. She constantly has to confront them and cope with caustic comments from others such as:

Rin: *You're such a dope and You idiot!*

and

Yubaba: *Anyone can see you're a lazy, spoiled crybaby and you have no manners.*

and

Yubaba: *You're just a stupid, useless weakling.*

The emphasis on characterisation and character development is expressed through conflict and this contributes to the dramatic tension in the story. Conflict is often referred to as the essence of narrative. From the beginning of the film Chihiro is at odds with things:

- her farewell flowers are dying;
- she does not wish to follow her parents into the tunnel and doesn't want them to go in either;
- she is repulsed by the sight of her parents as pigs;
- she resists Haku at first even though he is trying to help her;
- she is alarmed by and denies her metamorphosis into a transparent state saying to herself: *It's just a dream-wake up, wake up!*

In terms of categorisation Miyazaki has described it as an adventure film for 10-year-old girls, an unusual genre. Thematically it may also be seen as a study of *shojo*, young girls who are attractive but not in a sexual sense, and who are not yet women but are courageous and care for others, both animals and humans.

Control is another theme in the film. Haku is controlled by Yubaba who also controls Chihiro by stealing her name. This loss of identity leads Chihiro/Sen to her self-motivation to save her parents and escape from the bath house. As she achieves this her personality matures and she becomes a believable character in the story. She seems to mature from 10 years of age to about 15 during the course of the film whilst remaining a 10 year old in biological terms. Another form of control is being trapped under a spell and this is also worked into the narrative. When the frog on the bridge sees Chihiro as being human, Haku puts it under a momentary spell. Haku himself is under a form of apprenticed control/spell to Yubaba and the sootballs work under Kamajii's spell.

There are references to other stories e.g. Chihiro is told to chew and swallow the piece of food that Haku gives her because of its magical ability to stop her appearing transparent like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* who can eat to grow taller or smaller. Later in the film he tells her not to look back as she is leaving the bath house just as in the tale of *Orpheus and Eurydice* where Orpheus is instructed not to look back at his wife as he leads her out of the underworld.

In addition to the drama Miyazaki also employs some slapstick scenes for comic effect e.g. when Chihiro is running/falling down the outside stairs and when No-Face slaps against the wall at the foot of some stairs inside the bath house. These comic scenes provide momentary relief from the ongoing drama.

There is also the element of performance, of how the animators obtain a convincing performance from the characters through their animation of them. Miyazaki obtains strong performances from his cast of live actors who supply the voices from the young boy who voices Yubaba's baby and the girl who plays Chihiro to the experienced professional actress who plays Yubaba. He also gets good results from his animators who deliver the visual performances of the characters in the film.

2.2 Soundtrack

Music- instrumentation and musical arrangement

Speech, dialogue and narration

Sound effects

Miyazaki hired the accomplished composer Joe Hisaishi to compose an emotional and stirring score and conduct the orchestra for the recording of the *Spirited Away* soundtrack. The soundtrack can help establish the mood of the *anime*. In the opening scene when the family discovers the theme park they walk past a tower building. The sound of the wind blowing and leaves rustling can be heard on the soundtrack. These two sounds are mixed together to produce an eerie sounding tone about which Chihiro comments:

- Chihiro: *Did you hear that building? It was moaning.*
- to which her mother replies:
- Mother: *It's just the wind.*
- The eerie and creepy atmosphere that Chihiro is experiencing is coming directly from the soundtrack rather than from the images.

Hisaishi's musical arrangement of the score features contrasting effects produced by the brass and string instruments, the former for dramatic and strident mood and the latter for a lighter and more whimsical effect. The thematic motif played on piano is threaded throughout the film. It is Chihiro's theme, e.g. during one scene in the boiler room when Kamajii finds her sleeping on the floor and covers her with a cushion or blanket, this delicate piece of music can be heard on the soundtrack and it expresses both her vulnerability and his care.

There are three additional components to consider apart from the music. These are the vocal performances of the voice actors in speech, dialogue or narration, the sound effects other than musical sounds, and the quality of acoustical space used in the recording such as the quiet calm, musical interludes by moonlight.

In addition to his mix of music and sound effects he makes great use of silence in his soundtrack. Silence and stillness relate to Japanese traditional art forms e.g. after the noisy and dramatic sequence in which the rubbish has been released from the stink god there is an almost silent moment with just the sound of a single drip whilst Sen stands on the edge of the bathtub and the water drains away through the floorboards. There is a symphonic score, full at times, but at other times this is reduced to delicate, tinkling piano music.

There is no narration in the film. All speech and dialogue come directly from the

characters that can be seen interacting on screen. The Disney Studio has supplied an English language soundtrack alternative to the original Japanese language soundtrack. When swapping between both of these on the DVD it is only the dialogue track that changes, either Japanese or English. The other parts of the soundtrack, music and sounds, remain the same.

2.3 Image

2.3.1 Art and design

- graphic and visual style including experimentation and choice of media e.g. acrylic, oil, water colour, *gouache*, pastel, crayon, charcoal, pencil, calligraphy brush, collage, cut-outs, objects such as dolls, puppets and toys, photography
- character design
- sets and visual space
- costumes
- props
- make-up
- titles
- special visual effects

In terms of the analysis of the image track the artwork and design of the *anime* are good starting points. Appropriateness of the visual style and artwork choices made by the director are fundamental aspects of *anime*. Analysing which design style has been chosen and how that style has been manifested in the settings, props, costumes, make-up, lighting and visual effects, titles, graphics and the use of digital technology is the next issue, e.g. Chihiro's costume reflects that worn by a typical 10 year old *shojo* character. Also, it can be considered how design elements such as line, form, colour and texture have been manipulated and to what effect.

In animation there is the control of being able to generate the image, rather than simply record an existing image, so in addition to the narrative and the characters, the artwork is one of the essential elements. Miyazaki creates a fantasy world full of imaginary figures, vapours and spirits that are not so much drawn from art history as his own imagination e.g. not like *youkai* tradition. Incredibly he manages to create a spooky atmosphere in broad daylight.

He makes use of landscape and weather and the effects of weather on the landscape, in particular the wind. He also makes use of the time of day e.g. in the scene following Chihiro's meeting with Yubaba and her assignment to Rin there is a beautiful shot of dawn with the sun rising in the distance behind the bath house. This is followed by a shot of the main street and the night lights being switched off. The artwork is soft and hazy to match the dawn atmosphere and quality of light.

The semiotic aspects offer a rich field of analysis with the notion that all imagery has some visual metaphorical potential. Miyazaki expresses his anger with the way Japan

is heading. By having Chihiro's parents metamorphose into pigs he is suggesting that they have given in to their greed. They literally eat like pigs. The acquisition of an imported and expensive European car, the credit cards and the polo shirt are perhaps signs, along with the abandoned theme park that was constructed in Japan's economic boom time, of the pursuit of materialism and escape at the expense of Japan's nature and traditional culture.

Working largely from a palette of muted colours Miyazaki manipulates the visual elements to create scenes of delicate beauty like the lit up ferry on the water at night in front of the lit up village. He does not follow the widespread use of the *anime* style of characters with huge eyes and small mouths but rather adds his own interpretation of *anime* character design. This is a magical sequence.

2.3.2 Animation

- technique/technology employed (rotoscoping/ pixillation/ claymation/ stop motion/ drawn/ digital 2D or 3D, puppet, cut-out, plasticine, cell, painting or drawing on paper, sand on backlit glass, coloured pencil)
- animism/ anthropomorphism/ metamorphism/ plasticity
- visual metaphor (literal or symbolic)
- synchronisation/ fusion of animated image and soundtrack
- movement (quality of, style of, tempo, expression through movement)

Animation is particularly appropriate for dealing with fantasy stories. With the now available digital animation and computer graphic imagery and special visual effects the credible creation of the unreal is achievable. The location and characters that don't exist can be created and made convincing.

In animation the script is drawn in storyboard form. Some live-action films are, too, but for animation it is an essential stage of pre-production. Model sheets of what the characters look like from various angles and design of the settings and spatial environments also need to be done at this stage. The story may be conceived in words or literary form but then it must be drawn.

Similarly, in terms of narrative development, an animation may open with an establishing shot to reveal the scene and then move in to closer shots of characters and details. The point-of-view technique (POV) wherein a character is seen looking at something or someone, followed by a shot of that something or someone, followed by a repeat of the character looking, creates the visual communication that the intervening shot is what or whom that character is looking at. POV is often used to construct the narrative.

Turning to the animation, the question can be put of which style and which technique has been used. Is the animation drawn, painted, modelled, pixillated, roto-scoped, modelled from clay, of a special effects nature, or designed and produced digitally, is it 2D or 3D? Unusually in the 21st century Miyazaki limits computer generated imagery to no more than 10% of the artwork using mostly 2D hand drawn artwork which is the traditional approach to producing artwork for animation.

He makes extensive use of the notion of transition: river gods turning into junk piles and lumps of sewage or water dragons, an old woman turning into a bird, her baby transforming into a mouse, and gold morphing into dirt.

The scene of rain falling on the bath house at dusk while the workers prepare for the night session is a good example of the fusion of the animated image and the soundtrack. As the rain falls and makes puddles on the street and the bridge the sound and the sight of it are perfectly linked. Despite the difficulty of animating rain it is most convincing both aurally and visually.

2.3.3 Film and video technique

- cinematography including framing, angle and shot composition
- lighting
- visual effects
- editing

Many animators understand and make use of cinematographic language such as lighting effects, camera movements and use of character's point-of-view (POV) in constructing a narrative on film. Although the images for animated film consist of drawings rather than cinematography of live actors and real locations, film and video technique can easily be simulated in animation and this is certainly the case with *Spirited Away*. As a director Miyazaki is well versed in film form and he constructs his animation using a most cinematographic approach that demonstrates a good understanding of film language and techniques. He 'lights' scenes and moves the 'camera' around as if he were making a live-action movie. It's just that there are no camera or lights but only drawings that simulate their effects. When the family is walking down the main street of the theme park near all the shops and restaurants at the start of the film for example, the 'camera' moves along with them just like a tracking shot in a live-action film in which the camera is mounted on miniature railway tracks and moved smoothly over the ground.

Lighting is a key element of cinematography and videography. In the boiler room scene with Kamajii the two-dimensional artwork is given a three-dimensional look by the addition of shadows to the lighting. A shadow can clearly be seen over part of Chihiro's face whilst the remaining exposed area is covered in bright light. This gives her face the appearance of depth making her presence more believable.

Other contributing factors to film and video technique are visual effects and editing. Whilst it could be argued that all animation is a visual effect there may be sequences in a film that require special design and engineering. The transparency in appearance of the character No-Face in some sequences is a case in point. Here the character is digitally added or composited over the normal artwork to complete the scene. The particle animation of water in the big bath in the bath house scene is another example of this.

Finally, all of the recorded parts of the drawn narrative need to be assembled together to make up the scenes and sequences of the film and made to flow in such a way that the story may be followed and understood. This process is known as editing.

Editing has a bearing on the tempo or pace of the *anime*. The scene where Chihiro is running out of control down the wooden stairs has a very fast tempo whereas the scene near the end of the film where Haku and Sen are flying and floating in the sky has a very slow tempo and pace and they seem to descend down to land near the waiting Yubaba in a form of slow motion.

Miyazaki as *auteur*: a few notes toward suggesting the artistic style of Miyazaki

In asserting Miyazaki's mastery of the *anime* form one needs to identify the attributes and characteristics of his style that help make his work distinctive. Some suggestions that are related to *Spirited Away* (and also to some of his other films) are as follows:

- use of young female protagonists in many of his films (Chihiro is a 10 year old girl).
- narrative in which a character is able to mature and undergo psychological development (whilst Chihiro remains a 10 year old she seems more like a 15 year old at the end of the film.) (Kiki in *Kiki and the sisters* in *Totoro* also experience psychological development during the film).
- interspersing dramatic passages with brief moments of slapstick to provide comic relief.
- preference for a subdued soft pastel colour palette (the colour of the art work in *Spirited Away* is muted rather than garish with the possible exception of some of the scenes in the main hall of the bath house where all of the gods are parading around).
- inconsistency of design of animated characters from realistic to stylised. The opening sequence when the family car turns off the main road has near photorealistic representation of the road, road signs, houses and scenery. On the other hand the design of the sootballs in the boiler room is quite cartoon-like. In terms of the character design Yubaba and her twin sister appear in SD, or super deformed style in which the character's head is approximately half of its body length. This exaggerated design is usually employed to cute effect with emphasis on the expressive qualities of the face but Miyazaki turns it into a grotesque feature with wrinkled face and a long nose. By contrast Haku appears in *bishonen* style, a slightly androgynous looking male of normal physical proportions.
- many of his characters engage in flight (Haku/Yubaba/Chihiro/Kiki/Totoro/ Porco Rosso/Nausicaa/Laputa) and the act of flying is a feature of many Miyazaki films.
- strong references to the Japanese spirit world but of his individual interpretation rather than the traditional design of these spirits.
- preference for old, sometimes European style architecture to create a particular mood through the locations and visual settings. The design of the theme park entrance, main street shops, bath house and railway are examples of this.
- use of both restrained and stirring musical score by the composer Joe Hisaishi, who has scored several of Miyazaki's films. He contrasts this with passages of quiet soundtrack making use of silence and low volume in his soundtrack. The

periods of silence and stillness relate to some Japanese traditional art forms. His films are generally quieter than most *anime*.

- respect for nature and the environment (Haku can't go home because his river has been turned into an apartment block and in *Mononoke* the landscape is ruthlessly levelled by a munitions factory).
- creator of convincing fantasy world including attention to detail in use of realistic backgrounds has the effect of making the settings believable e.g. in the opening sequence when the family car turns off the main road.

Napier says that Miyazaki offers *an alternative vision to the conventional Japanese view of nature, which, whilst acknowledging the wildness of nature, prefers to view it as something that can be tamed and cultivated*. He suggests a vision of what he feels has been lost to contemporary Japanese society.

3. Detailed analysis of prescribed extracts

3.1 Chihiro's visit to Kamajii

Crouching together behind a bush in the garden to hide from the bath house staff who know of her 'human' presence, her new friend Haku reassures Chihiro that everything will be all right. She is wide-eyed and open-mouthed with fear as she listens to his instructions. By contrast he is calm and in control and positioned higher in the frame so that she, cowering, has to look up to him thus communicating a psychological imbalance between the two. Surrounded by flowers and lit by moonlight with very close contact between their faces it reads like a romantic scene although that is nowhere in her mind. They have discovered a corner of calmness away from the pandemonium inside the building.

A wide shot shows Chihiro on screen left coming out of the gate whilst to the right there is a steady flow of customers arriving or leaving across the bridge into the bath house. The bridge is lit whereas Chihiro is more in darkness. This underlines the tension of her mission.

The next shot is taken from a low angle looking up at her clinging to the wall and approaching the wooden stairs. Then we are introduced to the scene from Chihiro's point-of-view (POV) in the shot that shows her in the foreground with her back to the camera peering down the stairway that leads to the boiler room and Kamajii. A train races past, there is some steam seen escaping and the stairwell seems very steep and dark. Cut to a close-up shot of her looking down and looking scared. This simple editing of what she sees followed by her looking in the appropriate screen direction visually communicates the narrative.

The soundtrack in this sequence has a mixture of sound effects: steam, wind and the noise of the passing train. To this is added Chihiro's audible sigh as she gulps and swallows in trepidation about where she has to go. Almost in sympathy with her sense of fear come some sighing strokes from the violins that underscore the scene and strengthen the emotional intensity for the viewer.

Then some scary sounding violin strings are heard. These have the effect of adding to the tension. The light colour of her skin and sweater reflect the moonlight and make her easy to see against the dark wooden part of the building. A close-up shot of her putting her foot on a step that has a loose nail (that we see but she doesn't) creates further tension. In the next two shots from a fixed camera position, the first of her racing down the stairs and the second of her racing toward the camera, Miyazaki creates dramatic suspense as the fixed camera exaggerates her speed as she races away from it in the first shot and races toward it in the second shot. Then there is a third shot of the camera tracking downward at fast tempo on her looking terrified screaming and out of control. There follows a fourth shot of her POV of the approaching wall. This is followed by a cutaway shot of her running into the wall.

A slapstick effect is created by this sequence of Chihiro's running out of control down the breaking wooden stairs and colliding with the wall at the bottom. Music is used heavily in this sequence to create tension with violin strokes over her footsteps and

screams. The movement combined with the music and the screams creates drama just like the violin strokes composed by Bernard Herrmann for the soundtrack of the Hitchcock film *Psycho*'s shower murder sequence.

A wide shot of the exterior of the boiler room building with steam rising accompanied by sinister music adds further drama. Once down her movements continue to be tentative and Miyazaki mirrors the anxiety she feels in her facial expression and those creeping steps that she takes. Lighting is also used to establish the atmosphere. It is dark. The soundtrack contributes to the scary atmosphere by means of the constant hissing noise coming from the machinery. She tentatively enters through the door. Kamajii first appears as a sinister shadow moving across the wall in the next room. It comes as a shock to her when she first sees the spider shaped Kamajii in action. She is also shocked by the sootballs despite their small size and cute design. The machinery looks anthropomorphic with a suggested face and little pairs of dials that look like eyes. It hisses dramatically.

The sootballs provide comic relief. They look amusing yet are engaged in a dangerous activity involving throwing lumps of coal into the furnace. To do this they have to get dangerously close to the heat source then make a quick escape to the safety of the room. Chihiro backs out of the room and attempts to hide in the corner. It is all too much for her then a machine hisses steam loudly adding to her fear. A wide shot of her re-entering the boiler room emphasises the ordeal she has to face. The following shot has her in the foreground trying to attract Kamajii's attention over all the noise and activity. She has to shout to get his attention. He does not hear her so she is forced to move closer to him. Her POV shot of him looking down at her makes him seem fearsome. This is followed by a POV of his looking down at her. Miyazaki effectively works these up and down angles of film communication that result in inferior/superior relationship between the characters.

He quickly dismisses her request for a job in a somewhat disdainful tone:

Kamajii: *There's no work for you here, try somewhere else.*

Kamajii's movement provides an example of animation's plasticity of form. Kamajii's arms extend beyond their normal length to reach certain drawers in the room. This is reminiscent of 18th century Japanese woodcuts by Bokusen and Hokusai in which geishas can extend their arms to reach potential customers passing by on the street from their position inside a room.

Chihiro gets in the way of the sootballs doing their job and Kamajii's snaking arm as it reaches into drawers for herbs. Her helpful nature comes out when she rescues one of the sootballs that has collapsed under the weight of the coal it is carrying, and then takes its place carrying the coal to the furnace and throwing it in.

The design of the little sootballs is quite cartoon like and stands apart from the design of the human characters. Their skittish movement also provides humour. A cheerful tune is played as they march one after another up to the furnace to throw in their lumps of coal. The tune is layered over the sound of the sootballs' footsteps and the noise of the furnace and other machinery in the room and has the effect of providing a marked contrast. A dramatic musical motif is also introduced to underline the mood of the scene.

Some questions:

- Explain why Haku decides to help Chihiro.
- How does Chihiro impress Kamajii?
- Discuss the dominant colour tone inside the boiler room.
- What role does Kamajii play metaphorically in the bath house?
- How are the various elements of the soundtrack employed to create the atmosphere of the boiler room?
- Explain why Chihiro decides to help the little sootball that has been crushed by the coal.
- Describe the method Rin employs to feed the sootballs.
- Explain why Rin is so critical of Chihiro's lack of politeness to Kamajii.

3.2 Chihiro's visit to Yubaba

Chihiro's approach to Yubaba, the witch who runs the bath house, is more assured than her approach to Kamajii indicating that she has experienced an increase in confidence and nerve. The overhead angle of Chihiro approaching Yubaba's room shows the enormity of her task. This is followed by a shot of a bird logo with claws, on the wall. What is different is that Chihiro is moving faster now, not so hesitant as when she approached the boiler room. She is more resigned to her task but is still spooked when the doorknocker addresses her. This coming to life by an inanimate object is an example of animism.

Our first sight of Yubaba is a grotesque close-up shot of her teeth and nose. Similar to her falling/running down the stairs approach to the boiler room Chihiro is suddenly sucked/drawn at great speed to Yubaba through a series of doors that open then slam shut behind her. However, on this occasion she does not scream, even when she is dumped on the carpet in front of the fireplace. But she does recoil when the three disembodied heads bounce toward her. The sudden suction of Chihiro and the slamming of the doors behind her express Yubaba's powers as a witch as well as her impatience over Chihiro's slow tempo of approach.

Similar in staging to the boiler room scene, Chihiro starts by asking for a job. Yubaba responds to this by magically zipping her mouth shut.

Yubaba: *This is no place for humans.*

Yubaba: *And you should be punished, too.*

The angle of the shot showing Chihiro's POV looking up at Yubaba gives the latter authority. Yubaba lights a cigarette and exhales smoke like the machinery in the boiler room. When Yubaba unzips Chihiro's lips there follows a confrontational series of opposing close-up shots of first Yubaba, then Chihiro, with Chihiro demanding work and Yubaba getting increasingly angry. This use of editing involving the quick alternation between short timed shots builds tension between the two characters and creates conflict that results in dramatic effect. There is a confrontational two

shot of Yubaba aggressively leaning over Chihiro after flying toward her from behind her desk. The two are face to face but with Yubaba in the dominant pose.

The design of the characters is notable in this scene. Whereas Chihiro is proportioned in a more realistic manner Yubaba has been designed in what is referred to in Japan as SD or super deformed style. This involves making the head approximately half the body length of the character. This is usually done in *anime* for cute effect resulting in female characters with huge eyes, no noses and very small mouths. Miyazaki, however, subverts this by making the Yubaba character grotesque. When she presses herself against Chihiro, Yubaba's nose is about the same size as Chihiro's torso, and the latter's head would be almost the same size as one of Yubaba's eyes. This tense moment is broken by Yubaba's baby literally kicking the door down, and in slapstick style Yubaba gets kicked in the face by her baby and reappears with pieces of broken door in her hair. She may be able to run a large bath house but she finds looking after her baby a real handful.

Dialogue is also used to underline the power struggles in this scene with Yubaba suggesting that Chihiro could be turned into a piglet or a lump of coal to which Chihiro's reply is a quivering of lips and a trembling of shoulders.

Yubaba eventually offers Chihiro a contract. After agreeing terms and signing it Yubaba magically steals elements of the kanji from her name on the page thus changing Chihiro's name to Sen. So Chihiro, now Sen, must struggle to regain her name after nearly losing her physical identity earlier in the film when her body started to become transparent. She is reunited with Haku whom she witnesses taking orders from Yubaba to find work for her and she readily complies when Haku allocates her to Rin.

Some questions:

- Describe the décor and style of furnishings in Yubaba's room. Explain why Miyazaki designed it in this way.
- Explain why Miyazaki designed Yubaba as such a grotesque looking character.
- Describe some of the methods that Yubaba uses to control her staff in the bath house.
- How does Sen manage to persuade Yubaba to give her a job?
- What is Haku's relationship to Yubaba?
- Explain the significance of the huge size of Yubaba's baby.
- What could Yubaba's bouncing, disembodied green head pets represent metaphorically?
- What might Miyazaki be implying by Yubaba's line *You humans always make a mess of things?*

3.3 The stink god's visit to the bath house

The bath house is a place where Yubaba says: *8 million gods can rest their weary bones*. For Miyazaki it offers the opportunity to demonstrate his comic talent as he makes more use of slapstick when Sen slips off the edge of the big bath and slides down onto the floor. By now, however, she has developed so much confidence that she is able to face and communicate with No-Face.

The stink god approaches the bath house in the rain and the staff try to stop it crossing the bridge and entering. Yubaba gives Sen the task of looking after this special customer. Sen's hair stands on end and begins to frazzle from the bad odour being given off by the stink god. Sen's wide-eyed apprehensive look returns but this time her face is given a more cartoon like expression. Everyone is holding their noses and the bad smell even causes the food that Rin is carrying to wilt in the bowls.

In Miyazaki's mind the messy, dripping, moving lump entering the clean and scrubbed domain of the bath house could be a metaphor for the industrial pollution entering and spoiling Japan.

The stink god fills the large bath and Sen demonstrates her courage by climbing up the edge of the bath toward it and right into the path of its extremely bad breath. She has to wade knee-deep in the mud and slime dripping down onto the floor. Again Miyazaki works the POV angles of dominance and subservience. Not only does Sen climb up into the path of the bad breath, she falls into the bath with the big stinking lump. But she is rescued by it when it lifts her out of the water. It is then that she sees the thing protruding from its body. With great effort they pull at this plug until it is removed and disgorges a huge pile of junk. The cleansed spirit thanks Sen with a fur ball.

There is some use of CG 3D digital animation in this scene of the water bubbling in the bath but it mostly consists of hand drawn 2D animation as does the majority of the film. Then the spirit transforms into a long water dragon and, making a spectacular exit, flies out of the bath house having left some tiny gold nuggets in the mud. Sen is praised by Yubaba and looks proud of herself.

This scene is rich in visual metaphor. At first the stink god is given a wide berth with few of the workers willing to assist. Unfortunately for Sen she is ordered by Yubaba to assist and look after the god's needs. The visual appearance of the stink god is of a revolting mass of mud and bad odours, like a big lump of sewage when in fact it is not a stink spirit but a river god of a river that has been heavily polluted. The cleansing by herbal soap and water, both of the stink god, and inadvertently of Sen, represents a ritual transformation from imprisonment to liberation. For the stink god this is a ridding of all the pollutants that have been deposited in its river and an expression of Miyazaki's respect for nature and annoyance at industrial development that pollutes nature. For Sen the transformation is one of personality development through overcoming a challenge and then being praised by the boss and her staff, consequently strengthening her confidence in herself.

Some questions:

- In this scene, can you discern a difference in the use of animation technology in the animation of the water?
- Explain the connection that is made in the story between Sen and Haku when Sen is submerged in water in the big bath.
- In this scene the stink god rescues Sen from under the bath water. Which other character also rescues Sen from water in the film?
- Describe how the soundtrack changes when Sen is submerged.
- There is a lot of water in this scene and throughout the film. Discuss the metaphorical use of water in the film.
- Explain why all the bath house staff help Sen and Rin pull out the ‘thing’ that is stuck in the stink god.
- Identify the Japanese art style that the face of the stink god resembles as it rises from the bath after having been returned to its river god state.
- Explain why Yubaba is so happy with Sen for taking care of the stink god.

3.4 Chihiro’s visit to Zeniba, her return to Yubaba and resolution of the story

The train arrives at the station at night in an eerie landscape lit by moonlight. Sen is walking freely to her next confrontation. Throughout the film her developing confidence can be measured by the speed with which she approaches each confrontation. She is still surprised when the enchanted lantern comes hopping up to her and No-Face but she doesn’t panic but rather takes magical appearances in her stride. The enchanted hopping lantern that comes out to greet Chihiro and company is another magical manifestation. She marches up to Zeniba’s door and enters quite composed. Zeniba, Yubaba’s identical yet opposite sister does look identical to her twin sister but has a completely different nature. Sen talks to her in a more relaxed manner. Zeniba has a more comfortable and friendly room than her sister and she offers her guests tea and cakes. The golden seal stolen by Haku from Zeniba is returned by Sen to her in her cosy house. Zeniba makes and presents Sen with a woven hair tie that Sen can still be seen wearing at the end of the film when she has been reunited with her parents as Chihiro. This is evidence that she didn’t dream this adventure but that it actually happened.

Haku arrives in dragon form and Sen is thrilled to see him again. Sen’s sudden flinging of her arms around Haku and flying away with him on his back expresses her *shojo* qualities of caring as well as providing Miyazaki with the opportunity to communicate his love of flying and floating sequences. Zeniba notes the romantic situation that is developing:

Zeniba: *That’s love for you.*

and

Zeniba: *Only love can break a spell.*

Soaring into the sky to stirring music on the back of Haku, Sen recalls her childhood encounter with him in the Kohaku River.

Chihiro: *They filled in that river. It's all apartments now.*

Haku: *That must be why I can't go home.*

Even flying then falling she doesn't panic as she had done earlier in the film when faced by a frightening situation.

Returning to the bath house Sen marches straight up to Yubaba for her test. This demonstrates her newfound confidence and determination. She is greeted with the remark:

Yubaba: *You've got guts.*

This comment is in marked contrast to Yubaba's earlier more demeaning descriptions of her. Yubaba challenges Sen to pick out her parents from two rows of assembled pigs. When Sen answers correctly and the pigs transform into staff from the bath house, her contract bursts into flames in Yubaba's hand and she is somewhat reluctantly forced to release Sen and her parents.

An uplifting typically Miyazaki setting of blue sky with puffy white clouds and a sloping grassy landscape greets the heroine and points to a happy resolution to the story. The parents are unaffected by it all as if it didn't happen, signifying that they have not learned a thing and probably won't change their ways but Sen, now Chihiro again, has matured dramatically and the film can be said to have, like a fairy tale, a happy ending.

When the car departs with the family on board the father notes that going to the new school experience might present a challenge for Chihiro and in a massive understatement and testament to her new confidence and maturity she replies:

Chihiro: *I think I can handle it.*

Some questions:

- On arrival at the station in Swamp Bottom how does Miyazaki establish a sense of place?
- Identify the visual elements he employs and explain their effect.
- Explain why No-Face is content to follow Sen at this stage of the story.
- Explain the effect on the mood of the film of finally introducing music on the soundtrack as they approach Zeniba's house from the train station.
- List the different sounds used to make up the soundtrack in this sequence.
- How does Miyazaki make Zeniba's character design different to her sister when they look and sound identical?
- How are the little animal characters of the bird and mouse (the morphed characters of Yubaba's bird and baby) used to create humour in this scene?
- Explain the effect that the folk song at the end of the film has on the meaning and spirit of the film.

Glossary of terminology

<i>anime</i>	animation produced in Japan
animism	the belief that all natural objects and the universe itself possess a soul; belief in spiritual beings or agencies; part of Shinto religious beliefs
artwork	the graphic material that is an essential element of traditional animation and that is recorded by photographic or digital process
<i>auteur</i>	the French notion of the film director as artist producing a consistent body of work
CG	computer graphics
genre	the French notion of categories of literature, applied to film
<i>manga</i>	Japanese comic books
metamorphosis	a transition device in which one form changes into another form
plasticity	the flexible or pliable nature of material
POV	point-of-view
SD	Japanese design style called <i>super deformed</i>
storyboard	visualisation of film in graphic form prior to production
<i>yokai</i>	spirits that are mutations of humans, animals or plants and that appear at dawn or dusk at the crossroads of the human and spirit worlds - Featured in the <i>anime</i> television series <i>Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro</i> .

Analysis of issues in *Spirited Away*

This article by Amy Cotton addresses some of the prescribed issues as set out in *Japanese Extension HSC 2009–2013 Course Prescriptions* (Board of Studies NSW). It was previously published in a different format for *Metaphor*, the journal of the English Teachers' Association of NSW. The introduction and conclusion have been changed for the Japanese Extension support materials.

Spirited Away, Oscar winner, was a national blockbuster and is an internationally, critically appraised masterpiece. Studio Ghibli considers itself an animation production house rather than of *anime*, but western reception of the film, struck by its 'Japaneseness' broadly applies the term to all Ghibli films, regardless of Miyazaki's wishes.

This elegiac, *bildungsroman* film is concerned with the impact of change on Japanese society. (A *bildungsroman* is a novel which concerns itself with the development of a youthful protagonist as he or she matures.) Consumerism and globalisation are depicted as corrupting forces, impacting the environment, the Japanese people and their traditional lifestyles and values. However, Miyazaki presents a problematic view of globalisation, initially offering spiritual moments (the stained glass windows and font in the entrance to the liminal world), then degradation as a result of globalisation, then reconciliation with the traditional European setting of Zeniba's cottage. Most problematic of all is the changing nature of the *shojo*. Chihiro learns strong feminist ideals, shown in an approving fashion by Miyazaki (a topic visited often by this director). This film is questioning the impact of change on Japan as a culture, environment, people and economy.

Chihiro's journey severs, creates and redefines her relationships with her peers, parental figures, her country, the environment and her culture. She goes through a cyclical development from child to young adult to mother figure to a leader of her community and back to a child. The film is in essence a preview of the potential of the *shojo* to save and change Japan.

Various characters search for their personal identity. Many are lost or consumed by material vices. It is Chihiro with her innate spirituality who is able to navigate the material world successfully. However, she does more than find herself, she saves environments (rivers), spirits (No-Face) and, probably, Japanese culture, cleansing their spiritual sides of the base urges of materialism. In finding herself, Chihiro finds Japan's future identity.



Chihiro pokes her tongue out at her new school.

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The *shojo* (Issue: The search for identity)

Chihiro is presented by Miyazaki as a typical Japanese girl-child. In this text she is ten years old and she is linked to the idea of a *shojo*. In Japan a young female is seen as being a little woman. Napier believes Miyazaki is interested in developing the idea of a *shojo* further: ... *in the case of Miyazaki's works the shojo offer blueprints for a better identity that seems to combine both the nurturing aspects of the feminine and the strength and independence associated with the masculine.*¹ In presenting Chihiro as a character with the potential to change the world, Miyazaki is changing a Japanese stereotype concerning the qualities of a female's identity. At the same time, he is presenting a child as an identity waiting to flourish.

Whiny, spoilt and demanding, Chihiro is a reflection of her parents' values. She is disgruntled that she only received one rose for her birthday. Her voice is sharp and annoying (particularly in the English soundtrack) and her appearance is typical of the culture of the cute (*kawaii*) that is a popular depiction of *shojo* girls. She has rosy cheeks, a snubbed nose, is physically tiny, has an artistically scruffy pony-tail, and even her clothing is cute. The audience is initially provoked into a negative reaction to the character so that when Chihiro resists her parents' bad decision to eat the food of the gods it is a relief to see a challenge to the stereotype of a *shojo*.

There is a tense moment, however, when it seems that Chihiro as *shojo* will not survive without her parents. She literally begins to disappear, becoming just a bare outline of her former self. It is a non-family member, Haku, who guides her at this point, giving her food and nurturance, and it is with this outside influence that she finds her solidity again. The food he gives her tastes bitter, unlike that which her parents would have fed her. This is symbolic of the process of growing up – reality is not that sweet! Chihiro's identity reforms with the guidance of a non-parental figure. Haku resists Chihiro's dependence on him, however, giving her a set of physical and mental tests that build her independence of character. The strenuous tests are frightening, representing any young child's journey out of childhood into adulthood.

¹ Napier, Susan J. (2005), *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* (Updated Edition). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, page 150.

Her childhood officially ends when she wins a job from Yubaba, signalling that she is now a working adult and will be allowed no further leniencies for being young. This is problematic for a traditional understanding of a *shojo*, who embodied traditional feminine characteristics of passivity and cuteness. Chihiro takes *shojo*hood into a new area – one where inquisitive, independent girls are champions of their families and of the traditional Japanese culture. As Chihiro’s initiative increases, her dependence on the ‘wisdom’ and advice of others decreases.



A high close up of vanishing Chihiro makes her look vulnerable whilst strong, mysterious Haku, half out of frame, soothes her.

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One notable scene that metaphorically depicts Chihiro’s hazardous journey from childhood to adolescence is the set of backless, rotting, wooden stairs she must descend in order to find work. The staircase clings to the side of the bath house, and a high angle/depth of field shot shows the vertical distance beneath the rail-less stairs to the valley’s floor. Included also is the sound of wind blowing, the animation of Chihiro’s hair flowing backwards contrasted with the steady steam below and the small train to give the height perspective.² The stairs, like the steps towards adolescence and adulthood, are numerous and scary. Chihiro childishly eases herself down the stairs. Her body is smaller than gaps between the stairs, and there is a concern that the child might slip through to her death. It is amusing that even as Chihiro finds the confidence to start *stepping* down rather than crawling, the rotten wood gives beneath her foot and she is flung into a full tilt run into adolescence. Chihiro survives this terrifying sequence to run smack into a wall, comically flattening. Once there, she freezes, panting and petrified. When there is fear of being detected, Chihiro must take the initiative and step out of danger and once again on the path to adulthood. There is a symbolically closed door, and Chihiro must open it. Compare this scene to the pipe she must cross later in the film – pay particular attention to her lack of hesitation.³

This is not to say that Chihiro is immediately independent, for Rin shows her an adult woman’s work and a modern, sassy attitude. When Chihiro forgets her name, it is

² A nice shot of the railway is included here, an allusion to the other journey Chihiro must make later in the film.

³ Chen, Jerry “From Ashes to Stone: Development of Chihiro in ‘Spirited Away’”,

<www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/essay/files/JerryChen_Ashes.pdf> (Modified: 3 Jun 2006. Accessed: 26 Nov 2006).

Haku that gives it back to her. Kamajii cares for her. Even when the journey is over, and Chihiro is reunited with her parents, she clings to her mother again, seemingly returning to a true *shojo* form. The film's ending is ambiguous as to whether she will revert or continue on, but the audience has reason to be hopeful that she will remain empowered when the hair-tie of friendship she wears glistens in the sun.



Chihiro clings to the wall as the audience is shown from a high angle the stairs (of adolescence) and the train that is part of her later journey churns past below.

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The role of parents and the theme of nurturing (Issue: Relationships)

Chihiro's parents are materialistic, selfish and impulsive. They fail their role as parents and the film is a critique about the current state of parenting in Japan. Chihiro's father endangers the family's lives with his reckless driving along the overgrown, cobblestone road. He is physically lost, not knowing the way to their family home, which is a neat metaphor for modern fatherhood. The father fails to heed the advice of his daughter, who senses danger as they enter the abandoned theme park, does not help her cross the difficult terrain of the dry river, and laughs at her hesitancy about stealing food. His comment that, "Don't worry dear, Daddy's got a credit card" is in a proud tone, as if this mark of materialism is supposed to be the standard by which Chihiro judges the worthiness of her parents.

The father is fat, and swaggers. He is dressed in western, casual clothing, and he drives a right-hand drive Audi, one of the designators of class and wealth in modern Japan. His voice, loud and grating, proclaims knowledge about the failed Japanese economy and deserted theme park. He is a stereotype of a man who has ignored his Japanese heritage and embraced western consumerism. He is instantly recognisable by western as well as eastern audiences. The mother's clothing is similarly western, although she does display knowledge of Japanese culture and history, to her credit. She is amused by such trivia, however, not respectful of it.

The mother is characterised by her unwillingness to nurture her child, evoking thoughts of emotional neglect, telling Chihiro to 'wait in the car' in the unknown

woods by herself and she berates the daughter by saying ‘Don’t cling, Chihiro. You’ll make me trip’. This statement is repeated at the end of the film. The mother does not want to be held back on her journey by her daughter, and would prefer that Chihiro remain out of sight completely if the child is too needy. Greedy and materialistic, the mother is certain that all situations can be fixed by money, and she also fails to heed her daughter’s warnings.

The scene where Chihiro finds that her parents have turned into pigs is frightening, obscenely grotesque and quietly amusing in its symbolism. It seems her parents have been corrupted by consumerism and have become capitalist pigs, physically whipped by undefinable dark entities of consumerism. The diegetic sounds of grunting, crashing plates, and spilling food and liquid couple with the close up of the smashing crockery to emphasise the piggery and degradation being witnessed by the child. In this sequence, every shot contains the shininess of sweat, slobber or steam, as well as filth. The clockwork score peaks, as if something inevitable has occurred. A POV (point of view) shot from a low angle makes the audience directly sympathise with Chihiro’s horror. The reverse shots show Chihiro’s progressive movement backwards (from close up to mid shot), and her hair stands on end to imply her distress. Her childish movements, wide eyes and pinpoint irises reinforce this, and when the pig-father’s monstrous head encroaches on her midshot, the audience is aware of her sudden alienation from her parents.

Chihiro runs, not wanting to believe that her parents are pigs, back to the dry river bed which is now an immense river. Her parents gone, Chihiro is trapped and lost in the world of consumerism where its forces are out to find her and entrap her body and spirit.



Chihiro's father, as a pig, is swatted by the barely discernable entity of consumerism.

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Her parents are soon replaced by the presence of Haku, the romantic interest of the film. As both characters are presented as extremely young, there is not so much as even a kiss, but there is a definite youthful interest in each other. Haku is handsome, wearing blue, shown usually with wind blowing in his hair and masculine clothing, and there is a mysterious charisma portrayed in the low angle shots of him. It is Haku who feeds Chihiro, saving her from literally fading into nothing, and even through his

kindness in saving her life, traps her in the fantasy world. Perhaps Haku represents the love interest that replaces the importance of children's parents in their lives, but in any case it is his strong friendship, and Chihiro's reliance upon it, that substitutes her parents' values. Later, Haku brings Chihiro rice balls saying "I've put a spell on it, so it'll give you back your strength." These pieces of food are associated with the lunch a mother packs for her child for school, and as such represent comfort, reassurance and nurturance.⁴ Her other friends also prove to be better parental figures, with Rin becoming a guiding force for Chihiro's burgeoning womanhood, Kamajii caring for her with a father's quiet covering up of sleeping Chihiro's cold form and Granny Zeniba providing warmth and homeliness in her Swampbottom cottage.

Chihiro must work to free her parents. This is an inverse that seems universally repellent, for it is the parents who should care for their children. Throughout her struggles Chihiro is focussed on rescuing her parents, a loyalty which speaks much for her character because her parents seemed less caring towards her. In the final test, when Chihiro must distinguish her parents from the rest of the pigs, the little woman makes a discovery – none of the pigs are her parents. This implies that deep down inside, Chihiro's parents were not pigs to the core, and that they might have some qualities that will redeem them as parents. What is certain is that Chihiro, as a child, is a wiser, more intelligent character than her parents. It seems that the only hope for Japanese family values, which aren't evident in the parents, is in the children.



During this scene the lighting rapidly changes representing one of the shifts into the liminal world. The shadows close over Haku's face so the audience is unsure of his loyalties even whilst they are impressed by his evident power. The sunset, red colour scheme and wind in his hair reveal his power whilst his unusually green eyes signify a mysterious soul.

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Yubaba and her humungous baby are part of the comic relief of the film, but at the same time are horrifying. The theatre of the grotesque/carnival has a long tradition in Japanese entertainment, and Miyazaki has used the genre to emphasis the degradation of modern Japanese societal values. The tremendously huge baby that towers over his hideously ugly, old mother is a pointed commentary about another type of parent – the mother who won't let a child grow up. Despite the baby's size,

⁴ Napier (2005), op. cit., p 187.

Yubaba keeps him in a nappy and imprisoned in a nursery. This is to protect the baby from the dangers of the outside world (the baby is kept in a padded nursery – walls and floors cushioned to protect it from hurting itself even inside the nursery), and it is Chihiro who points out that staying inside is the only thing that is harming the baby. The baby is a crying, indulgent, spoilt creature and it is only Chihiro, with her tough love, that has ever kept the baby in line. Again Chihiro is providing the moral framework that an adult has been unable to supply. At 88 minutes the baby (as a mouse) imitates Chihiro, demonstrating the hero-worship associated with a child that respects an elder. The baby is shown at first as merely enormous kicking and flailing limbs, emphasising the power that mothers allow children to exert over them. There are too many toys in the nursery (characters are constantly colliding with them, and the baby has no regard for the worth of the toys), emphasising the materialistic over-indulgence that is showered on modern children.

Zeniba, Yubaba's twin sister, plays a trick on her by turning the baby into a mouse (albeit a heavy one), and turns three grotesquely amusing bouncing heads into a simulacrum of the baby. Yubaba, however, doesn't notice that her baby has gone, saying much about her inattentiveness as a mother.

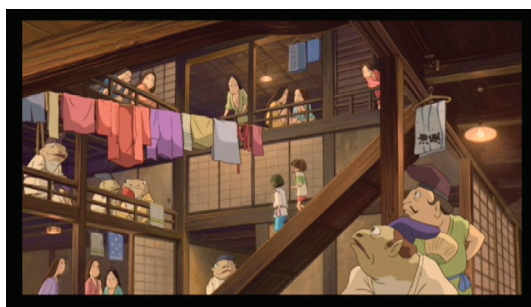
Consumerism and Japan's disappearing traditional values (Issue: The impact of change on society)

Chihiro's parents' bad habits lead them to literally transform into consumerist pigs, but she refuses to take part in the consumer society and so begins to disappear. Eating a bitter piece of consumerism allows her to physically remain in the society, but she must enslave herself to the ideal in order to set her parents free – she becomes involved in child labour as a slave in order to pay for the evils of her parents' debts. This is perhaps reminiscent of a time in Japan when selling children to settle parents' debts was, if not common, accepted. She must even give up her name to participate in this consumerist society.

Napier asserts that *Spirited Away* "...is an explicit critique of the consumerist lifestyle that created the *shojo* phenomenon"⁵. Whilst this is clearly true, the film goes further in its didactic efforts, evaluating the effects of consumerism on Japanese culture. At its most obvious level the film is about the deterioration of traditional values. The Shinto spirits themselves have become customers who wield gold, buying the people's affection. Cavallaro asserts "...the film's animistic deities are turned into emphatically fleshy, decadent, quasi-aristocrats anxious only to be pampered and fed the choicest of dishes... [T]heir irreverent portrayal also has the effect of throwing into relief the logic of rampant consumption to which post-industrial societies are enslaved in a demoralising fashion, by [the spirits] being associated not with the corporeal dimension – as one could expect – but with the spiritual one."⁶ The spirits are venerated for little else other than their patronage.

⁵ Ibid., page 180.

⁶ Cavallaro, Dani, *The Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, McFarland & Company (USA), 2006, page 139.



The slaves' quarters

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Kaonashi ('No-Face') acts as a dark, ghostly, masked representation of consumerism. He fails to tempt Chihiro, but he soon learns that his gold will buy almost anything. The bath house workers are eager to serve him in exchange for payment, but the price of their materialistic yearnings is high – he begins to consume *them*.⁷ The only being for which he yearns, however, is Chihiro, whom he cannot harm because materialism no longer tempts her. Miyazaki seems to hope that the younger generations of Japan will not be wooed by consumerism.

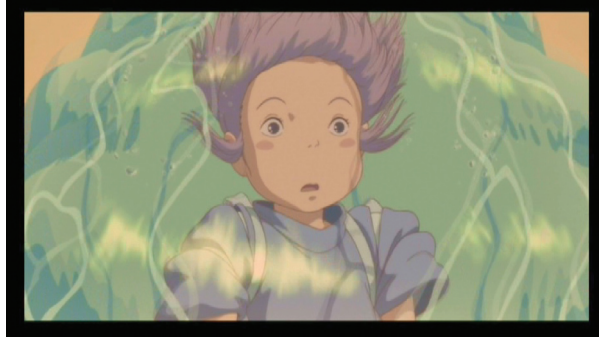
The overt wealth displayed in Yubaba's grand apartment (much attention was paid to the creation of glistening gold in these sequences) contrasts sharply with the workers' dwellings. The European ghastriness of Yubaba's rooms demarcates her as the apex of the capitalist pyramid. Her servile attitude towards the customers establishes, however, that one is never quite free of the clutches of consumerism if one is participating in it. The workers' quarters are representative of traditional Japanese dwellings, with conventional furnishings and expansive views of the countryside. It is on this balcony that Chihiro finds inner peace, getting in touch with Japan's rural beauty. They are poor, however, sleeping together and possessing very few things (not even their clothes). It seems that Rin has been saving up to buy her freedom and a train ticket for a very long time, which speaks of the price of freedom (unattainable) and the wage she earns (negligible or wasted). The traditional Japanese domestic setting is depicted as a poor servant to the European richness many levels above it. Miyazaki has established that Japan's identity as a consumerist society is enslaved to European ideals. It is up to Chihiro, a representative of her generation, to forge a new path forward, reclaiming some of the traditional Japanese values to do with trueness and family.

The incident with the river god shows a link between youth and traditional Japan. The 'stink spirit' comes to the bath house, soiling it with foul pollution. It is clogged with the thrown away toys of consumerism, suffocating in the defecation of modern Japanese society.⁸ None of the adults wish to deal with the problem they have created, and it is left to *shojo* Chihiro to clean up the mess. She unclogs the effluence, and reveals in a dramatic scene the true river spirit beneath the mess. In the process

⁷ Thrupkaew, Noy, "Animation Sensation", The American Prospect (online journal), Vol. 13, Issue 19, Oct 21, 2002, <www.prospect.org/print-friendly/print/V13/19/thrupkaew-n.pdf> (Modified: 21 Oct 2002, Accessed: 26 Nov 2006).

⁸ Napier (2005), op. cit., page 184.

she is cleansed, and is rewarded for her efforts in fixing the environment. The river god assumes a Noh mask, which Napier recognises as “...a product of Japanese high culture and religion, that the river god assumes once it reverts to its ‘true form’ emphasises the link between the river and the Japanese sacred”⁹.



Chihiro is cleansed during her encounter with the water spirit.

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The power of words and names (Issue: The search for identity)

To emphasise Japan’s need to regain/build its identity, several characters are rendered nameless in the film. Chihiro is the obvious example, for when she enters slavery most of the characters of her name are taken by Yubaba, leaving only ‘Sen’. Whilst this is symbolic enough for a Western audience, there are further nuances that a Japanese audience enjoys. ‘Sen’ means ‘1000’ and a further pun on this could mean ‘river’¹⁰, linking her both to the river spirit and Haku (who is a river spirit himself). A student of mine once suggested that Chihiro’s name reflects the effort that one will go to find themselves, that is, a thousand fathoms. Alternatively, Sherwood states that “*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* translates ‘The Spiriting-Away of Chihiro and Sen’, a play on Chihiro’s full name (which translates ‘great depth’) in that its final character can also be pronounced *sen*...This implies that Sen is an ever-present yet hitherto undiscovered part of Chihiro’s identity.”¹¹

Chihiro is fortunate, for the part of the name she retains is strong. When she regains power over her name, she gains independence. Chen states that “[i]n a mythical world that causes people to lose virtue and become greedy, Chihiro is able to remain innocent because she remembers who she was – through her unclouded perspectives she is able to grow into a courageous, independent, and adaptable individual.”¹² Napier links Chihiro’s ability to retain her identity to the idea of the

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 184.

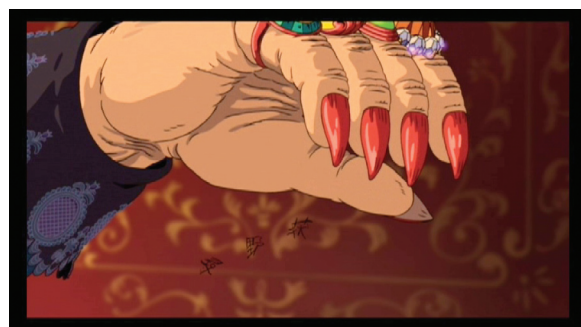
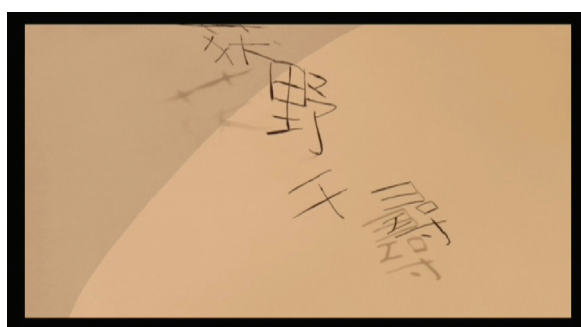
¹⁰ Cavallaro, (2006), page 136.

¹¹ Sherwood, Aaron. <www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/essay/files/AaronSherwood_Mythopoeia.pdf> (Modified: 29 March 2006, accessed: 26 Nov 2006)

¹² Chen (2006), *op. cit.*.

emerging reinvention of the *shojo* and as “...a positive testament to the power of memory to reconstitute the fragmented or attenuated psyche.”¹³

Of his film, Miyazaki has said, ‘The act of depriving a person of one’s name is not just changing how one person calls the other. It is a way to rule the other [person] completely.’¹⁴ Without her name, Chihiro is vulnerable, which can be linked to the loss of her normal costume and to the way she almost vanishes when her parents are taken away from her¹⁵. Haku, too, is ruled by Yubaba simply because he cannot remember his true name. His extraordinary abilities are exploited by Yubaba whilst she still withholds his name.¹⁶ Kamajii reflects on the changes enslavement has wrought on Haku with the dialogue, ‘His face turned pale and his eyes turned steely and he’s never been the same.’



The characters of Chihiro’s name are lifted from the page and are captured by the bejewelled, wrinkly, taloned, entirely unattractive and overtly consumerist hand of Yubaba.

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Once Chihiro is able to regain and hold onto her name, she takes a train journey across an intensely reflective flooded landscape, where islands of reality float in the distance. The train is filled with shadows of ordinary people, faceless and nameless which is indicative of the state of the general Japanese populace. On her journey, Chihiro takes Kaonashi with her. No-Face, as Chihiro calls him, has lost his identity. He craves Chihiro’s company because she is one of the few in the liminal world who

¹³ Napier (2005), op. cit., page 191.

¹⁴ Miyazaki, Hayao (2001) “*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi: The Purpose of the Film*” (translator unknown). <www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/sen/proposal.html> (accessed 26 Nov 2006).

¹⁵ Napier (2005), op. cit., page 187.

¹⁶ This focus on the importance of knowing a ‘true’ name invites a comparison study with Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea*.

possess purpose and, by then, identity. He has tried various methods of finding his identity: following Chihiro, attempting to buy her friendship, and actually eating other characters to take on their attributes. In the train carriage, however, Kaonashi is more solid and real than the people of Japan. He has found friendship. Later, at Swampbottom, he finds purpose when Zeniba (Yubaba's good twin) makes him industrious and shows him kindness.¹⁷ Sherwood sees No-Face as an externalisation of Chihiro's conscience for "[h]e absorbs ethos of his surrounding environs, becoming greedy in the bath house (his greed is purged as he leaves) and becoming good and caring in Zeniba's house....Sen must eventually leave her external conscience behind at Zeniba's house when she returns to face her final ordeal."¹⁸

In this liminal world, words hold power. Whilst Chihiro simply seems to be recognising Kaonashi's lack of identity when she calls him 'No-Face', other words she says are particularly powerful. At the beginning when she is disappearing, Chihiro is also saying, 'It's just a dream, a dream. Go away, disappear. Disappear', which contributes to her rapid vanishing.¹⁹ Similarly, when she wants a job, she cannot be refused, for she has verbalised what she wants.²⁰ Miyazaki asserts, "[i]t is still true that words can be powerful. That fact is, however, that powerless words are proliferating unnecessarily."²¹

Japan's national identity (Issue: The search for identity)

The film has a wistful tone which expresses Miyazaki's concerns about the current state of Japan's national identity. Apart from the previously discussed issue of the emerging role of the *shojo*, *Spirited Away* values selflessness, friendship, patience, competence, team work and a spiritual connectedness to core/traditional Japanese values.

Chihiro's quest to regain her parents is altruistic, as are Haku's efforts to save her from consumerism. When Haku in dragon form is mortally wounded, Chihiro risks her own life to save him in a fast-paced sequence when they fall to the bottom of the chute. She then gives him her blessing from the river spirit, which she had been keeping for a selfish reason (to save her own parents). In contrast to this, Yubaba, representing consumerism, has used Haku's strength to the point where he is dying, and literally has him pushed down a garbage chute. This graphic sequence reminds us of that human life has become a disposable tool of consumerism.

Throughout the film, characters who act in greed are punished, whilst acts of selflessness and friendship are rewarded. Likewise, the characterisation of Chihiro as persevering and patient distinguish her character from others, and there are several scenes where she must prove her competency at her job. She struggles to wash the floor at one stage, but does not give up, and when cleaning the bath she is tireless, and is accordingly rewarded with aide.

¹⁷ Cavallaro, (2006), page 139.

¹⁸ Sherwood (2006), op. cit..

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Miyazaki (2001) op. cit..

²¹ Miyazaki, Hayao's introduction 'Chihiro's Mysterious Town: The Aim of this Film' in English edition of Studio Ghibli's *The Art of Miyazaki's Spirited Away*. 2004, Studio Ghibli, Singapore, page 16.

Her spirit of willingness, inventiveness and obedience inspires the entire populace of employees to engage in a lengthy and overtly symbolic scene of team work. Employer, management, workers and spirits all join in the cry of 'heave', and there are several long shots emphasising the group work. Whilst it is Chihiro who begins and finishes the decontamination of the river spirit, it is only through the team work of the citizens of Japan (represented by the workers) that pollution is overcome. During this scene, fans with Japanese flags on them are abundant, linking this enthusiastic approach to teamwork with core traditional values.²² As a result of her environmental work Chihiro is cleansed in a lengthy midshot abundant in green and lilac tones complemented by a virtually silent soundtrack (broken by a few bubbles of surprise or revelation). The steam clears to reveal a close up of a Noh mask and an idyllic *shoheiga* screen wall, rewarding Chihiro and the audience with the beauty of the traditional Japanese art forms. It seems that through environmentalism, the Japanese people have the chance of relocating their national identity, as well as wealth (symbolised by the gold left in the wake of the river spirit).

Three rivers feature in this film. The river spirit below is clogged with pollution, the Kohaku River (Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi) has lost his home, and the artificial river floods dramatically. Man's interference with the course of water has had devastating effects in all three cases. Miyazaki suggests through his film that if the Japanese people can clean and return the flow of water to normal, that an integral part of their national pride will be returned to them. A further inference is that only a love of nature can work this change – Chihiro and Haku have a relationship that is impossible to continue, for she cannot have a romance with a spirit, but she can love nature! The extreme long shots of stunning natural environments and the abundance of organic sounds at the conclusion of the film emphasise the change wrought in her spirit through this journey.



Yubaba, holding the fans with Japan's flag on them, watches as Chihiro frees the river spirit of the pollution. The cleansing green of the water is juxtaposed with the dark brown of effluence, whilst the determined red of Chihiro's costume is contrasted with Yubaba's blue, wealthy clothing.

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²² Napier (2005), op. cit., page 184.

The setting of Zeniba's Swampbottom cottage is unexpected. The contrast between the dual characters of Yubaba's and Zeniba's abodes is extreme and the point that materialism doesn't satisfy is quite clear. The cottage is reminiscent of something out of a European fairytale, which is supported by a sweet score. Zeniba thinks that Yubaba's house is 'tacky' and is herself a matronly, European woman who engages in activities such as spinning and cooking. She wishes to be called 'Granny'. That Chihiro would find affirmation, purpose and identity in such a setting is surprising, and contradicts any notion that Miyazaki esteems only the traditional Japanese values over European ones. Rather it seems that core values of friendship and love can be found in any cultural setting; it is the lack of consuming materialism that is most important. Sherwood believes that Miyazaki rejects regular traditions and forms instead creating a "...mythopoeia that resonates with the human condition"²³.

Yubaba and Zeniba's duality is representative of two different outcomes of a life. One is frenzied with materialism whilst the other has rejected it and wages an active campaign against it. Their appearances and voices are the same, and they share magical prowess. Zeniba first appears quite evil, but her hard lessons display a sense of decent morals that Yubaba lacks entirely. The contrasts between the two characters show the different outcomes due to personal principles. The characterisation of Zeniba as a kindly, wise entity makes it clear which value should appeal to the audience.

Miyazaki's setting for the film condenses his view of modern Japanese values and the worth its populace places on its heritage. The bath house and its surrounds are actually an abandoned theme park that is a mere replica of the real thing. The theme park represents Japan's corrupted understanding of its cultural identity. The traditional setting has been reduced to a kitsch tourist trap polluted with neon signs and Anglicised words. The opening sequences offer many examples of cultural pollution. Early in the film, the father refers to the failed Japanese economy, which foreshadows the exploration of consumerism. Several dramatic shots of houses and Shinto statues indicate concerns about the commercialisation of Japanese culture. The theme park did not survive the recession, symbolising a failed venture into mixing the two ideologies. In contrast to the beginning of the film, Chihiro walks away from the fantasy with a deeper connection to her spirituality and an understanding of a stronger moral framework. Her strength and courage offers hope that in the future the Japanese identity will have less to do with commercialism and more to do with environmentalism and strong role models. It seems best to end with Miyazaki's words about *Spirited Away*, "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."²⁴

²³ Sherwood (2006), op. cit..

²⁴ Miyazaki (2004) op. cit., page 16.