Matter Out of Place: Carnival, Containment, and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away*

**Abstract:** This essay deals with the recent animated film *Spirited Away* by the foremost Japanese animator, Miyazaki Hayao. It examines *Spirited Away* as a representation of “cultural boundedness,” a reaction to globalization in which cultural products are used to reinforce notions of local culture as a form of resistance to perceived outside threats. It goes on to query the success of this attempt, arguing that *Spirited Away* undermines its overt agenda, ultimately expressing a culture beset by polluting and transgressing forces.

The films of Miyazaki Hayao, Japan’s greatest animation director, in many ways exemplify contemporary Japan’s complex cultural identity. Their *mise-en-scènes* span a variety of European-style fantasy worlds, from the Mediterranean/Scandinavian setting of *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (*Majo no takkyūbin*, 1989) to the French- and English-inspired *Howl’s Moving Castle* (*Hauru no ugoku shiro*, 2004), but also include the nostalgia-drenched vision of a 1950s Japanese farming community of *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*, 1988) and the radical reworking of fourteenth-century Japan presented in *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke-hime*, 1997). In this regard, they engage deeply with two interlinked trends that have dominated Japanese society over the last two decades and are summed up by the catchwords *koku*-*saika* (internationalization) and *furusato* (native place or old hometown). As Jennifer Robertson points out, these trends, while “appear[ing] to represent opposite trajectories” actually “exist coterminously as refractive processes and products, and . . . together they index the ambiguity of Japanese national identity and its tense relationship with cultural identity (or identities).”

Miyazaki’s work ranges across both the *kokusaika* (albeit as part of a distinctively Miyazaki-esque treatment of the “international”) and the *furusato* categories (although again embodying Miyazaki’s specific vision of the *furusato*). His 2001 fantasy *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*), however, occupies a more ambiguous position. Although at first glance seeming to celebrate various aspects of “Japanesness,” embodied in the film’s primary *mise-en-scène*, a magical bathhouse of the gods, *Spirited Away*’s narrative trajectory revolves around the tension between Japanese cultural identity and otherness and at least implicitly calls into question the viability of “Japaneseness” in a changing world.

Whether the director is fully conscious of the extent to which the film shows the vulnerability of Japanese identity is open to question. As Miyazaki makes clear in a number of interviews and writings on the film, his primary agenda in *Spirited Away* was to show the maturation of a contemporary young girl in the face of an array of frightening and fantastic encounters. In this regard he is certainly successful. The story of a ten year old venturing into a fantasy world when her parents are transformed into pigs, the film mixes humor, sentiment, and horror with dazzling imagery to provide an effective coming-of-age story with an arguably upbeat ending. This combination of elements clearly struck a chord with the Japanese audience and, as of this writing, *Spirited Away* remains the highest grossing film in Japanese history. To the film’s many admirers, Chihiro, the young protagonist, serves as a potential role model for today’s generation of apathetic Japanese youth.

Other, less conscious notions and themes may also have come to the surface in the creation of *Spirited Away*. When asked by an interviewer whether the film includes unclean things along with fantasy, Miyazaki explained that “in the act of creating a fantasy, you open up the lid to parts of your brain that don’t usually open.”2 These more subversive elements found when the director “lifted the lid” of his unconscious make the film one of Miyazaki’s most powerful and protean works. *Spirited Away* offers disturbing visions of excess, liberating moments of carnival, and a sharp critique of the materialism and toxicity of contemporary Japanese society through its complex vision of a quasi-nostalgic fantastic realm threatened by pollution from within and without. Although it should be acknowledged that the film contains many celebratory moments, its powerful depictions of cultural pollution, alienation, and fragmented or lost subjectivities imply a more pessimistic subtext.

This essay suggests that, despite its dazzling imagery and appealing fantasy *mise-en-scène*, *Spirited Away* is less an upbeat fantasy than a complex

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2. This interchange is from the program guide accompanying the film entitled simply *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*. Although it is in interview format, the interviewer is anonymous. There are no page numbers but the quotation is from the fourteenth page of the guide.
exploration of a contemporary Japan that is searching for what might be termed cultural recovery, or perhaps cultural rehabilitation, in a corrupt postindustrial society. This search involves a quest to rediscover and reincorporate elements of purity, self-sacrifice, endurance, and team spirit, all of which have been historically regarded as quintessentially Japanese, and reintegrate them into a form that has resonance for the contemporary world. The first part of this essay investigates some of the larger issues raised by the film’s subtext while the latter half consists of close readings of several of the most significant episodes in the film in relation to these issues.

Embodying in certain ways the tension between kokusaika and the furusato, Spirited Away may also be seen as participating in a significant current debate concerning globalization. This is the issue of the rise of local culture or boundedness in relation to what many theorists until recently have seen as an all-encompassing tidal wave of hegemonic and homogenizing uberculture (usually identified with American popular culture). This tidal wave was viewed as creating what Paul David Grange in a commentary on Arjun Appadurai calls a “deterritorialized community,” resulting from the “substantial weakening of national communities and the creation of a de-centered transnational global system.”3 One of the casualties of globalization, in this view, is the nature of “authenticity,” producing what Appadurai calls the possibility of “nostalgia without memory” in which “the past becomes a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios.”4

More recently, however, an alternative view of globalization has begun to take form in which local culture is seen as reconstructing and reaffirming itself in the face of globalization. In his article “Cultural Boundaries,” Simon Harrison notes that “the increasing transnational flows of culture seem to be producing not global homogenization but growing assertions of heterogeneity and local distinctiveness.” In fact, as he points out, the very permeability of boundaries in the contemporary world may be an inducement to the creation of what he calls “representations of boundedness” (his italics), i.e., “bodies of symbolic practices which . . . collectivities attribute to themselves, in seeking to differentiate themselves from each other.”5

In many ways, Spirited Away can be seen to take part in this latter trend as it presents through the culture of the bathhouse a memorable vision of a distinctively “Japanese” collectivity. But the film is far more than a facile homage to local culture, since so much of its action stems from the fragility and permeability of the cultural identity it privileges. The film contains

motifs of chaos and carnival (highly unusual in a Miyazaki work) that are at once evocative of the Japanese festival (*matsuri*) while at the same time they comment on the negative aspects of consumption in industrialized societies. Furthermore, it employs postmodern approaches such as bricolage and pastiche to create settings that contain Western and Chinese elements as well as Japanese ones. Much of the extraordinary visual pleasure of the film comes from this amalgam of diverse motifs and images. But these elements themselves can be seen as characteristic of contemporary Japanese society, a culture remarkable for its incorporation of disparate elements.

At the same time, however, *Spirited Away*’s diegesis suggests a more uneasy cultural trajectory in which disparate or alien elements are no longer included but instead problematized or even expelled from the film’s major visual trope, the gigantic, richly detailed bathhouse of the gods where most of the action takes place. These elements—including odor, vomitus, blood, and (arguably) excrement—all come from outside the bathhouse and are clearly marked as polluting. They are “matter out of place,” as Mary Douglas describes dirt, obviously positioned to contrast with the world of the bathhouse which, in its very function, serves to emblemize cleansing and purity of a quintessentially Japanese kind.\(^6\) The basic action of the film revolves around a series of polluting invasions of the bathhouse, which are repulsed by its denizens with the significant help of Chihiro, the human protagonist. Chihiro herself is initially signified as a polluting alien marked by her human stench, but gradually she becomes incorporated into the bathhouse collectivity where she grows in agency and maturity. Ultimately, the various rites of passage she undergoes lead to her accession of powers of perception that allow her to free her parents from the magic spell that has transformed them.

While *Spirited Away* draws from an immense array of sources, including Greek myth and Western fantasy such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*, the content and themes of the film suggest that Miyazaki may be performing a distinctive version of “Nihon e no kaiki,” a shift from the West and a turn toward Japanese culture that many Japanese writers and artists took throughout the twentieth century.\(^7\) In Miyazaki’s case, this “return to Japan” was presaged in *Princess Mononoke*’s vision of fourteenth-century Japan, one that drew on major issues in Japanese history but treated them in an original and often critical manner.

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6. For a description of the iconic role of the bathhouse in Japanese culture, see Scott Clark, *Japan: A View from the Bath* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994), in which he describes bathing in Japan as a “metaphor for life renewal” and also states that “in its various contexts, the bathing act renews purity, cleanliness, vigor, energy, health, warmth, tradition, status, relationships, and even self.”

7. For examples of *Nihon e no kaiki* among literary figures, see Kinya Tsuruta, ed., *Japanese Authors and the Return to Japan* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2001).
In neither *Princess Mononoke* nor *Spirited Away* does the “return to Japan” mean an unproblematic acceptance of all aspects of Japanese culture. Not only does *Spirited Away*, like *Princess Mononoke*, bring up issues of cultural identity and, incipiently, cultural collapse, it does so on a far more idiosyncratic and, in some ways, both more imaginative and more disturbing level than the previous work, highlighting certain problematic issues, including toxicity between the generations, environmental pollution, and the waning of traditional mores and customs, that are central to modern Japanese society.

The film deals with these issues through its engagement with three major tropes—liminality, specifically the use of liminal figures in liminal settings; excess consumption and its negative effects; and the figure of the *shôjo* (young girl)—to create an unsettling portrait of Japan at the turn of the millennium. The liminal world(s) of the film may be seen as metaphoric of modern Japan, a society that, with its fading grip on historic tradition and an ambivalent attitude toward the future, seems to emblematize Victor Turner’s definition of the liminal as being “betwixt and between.” Also identified with modern Japan is the powerful/vulnerable figure of the *shôjo* which has taken on an iconic significance in Japanese culture over the last two decades. The trope of excess consumption, however, transcends Japanese society, functioning as an important signifier throughout contemporary industrialized societies in which capitalism “prioritizes consumptive practice” and excess consumption becomes one of the emblems of the “dominant hegemonic subjectivity,” as David Larsen puts it in his discussion of the animated series *South Park.*

Despite such universal and international elements, Miyazaki’s agenda is obviously focused on Japan. In this regard, the film may be viewed as an ambitious attempt at the rehabilitation of certain aspects of an idealized traditional Japan, somewhat along the lines of the various projects aimed at maintaining or revitalizing Japanese traditions such as the Tono Folklore Museum or the Discover Japan advertising campaigns, detailed by Marilyn Ivy in her book *Discourses of the Vanishing.* As with those campaigns, *Spirited Away* may be seen as an endeavor to recover or retain a vanishing and/or marginalized culturally specific scenario. That this is a conscious attempt is clear from Miyazaki’s comments on the film which include the explicit warning that “in this borderless age . . . a man without history or a

people that forgot its past [sic] will have no choice but to disappear like a shimmer of light.”\textsuperscript{11}

But what is the “past” or the “history” to which Miyazaki is attempting to draw attention and how successful is he in doing so? On the one hand, “history” is clearly the marginalized, wondrous, or mysterious (fushigi) past evoked by Ivy and also by Gerald Figal in his book Civilization and Monsters in which he explores the relationship between the repressed elements of traditional Japanese culture and the modernization process at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, Miyazaki even describes the strange fantasy-land of Spirited Away as a “fushigi na machi” (wonderful or mysterious town). In Miyazaki’s vision, these repressed elements still exist on the psychic borders of modern Japan, approachable as long as one has the necessary awareness, knowledge, and desire. This view was first manifested in Miyazaki’s 1988 hit film My Neighbor Totoro, in which two young girls find a liminal world of fantasy creatures in the Japanese countryside. It is also evident as the animating force behind Princess Mononoke’s fresh vision of a Japanese past in which the abjected others of Japanese history such as nature spirits, women, and racial outsiders become embodiments of resistance against a homogenizing master narrative.\textsuperscript{13}

In the more carnivalesque world of Spirited Away, the repressed past returns in the form of a fantastic array of spirits who occupy the bathhouse, an institution that has largely disappeared, except for the occasional hot spring visit, from the lives of most contemporary Japanese. These creatures are clearly uncanny in Sigmund Freud’s sense of the term as describing something that is familiar yet at the same time out of place. The bathhouse spirits and their environs are no longer part of the “real world” in which the young protagonist Chihiro initially appears but, to the Japanese viewer, their visual manifestations and functions evoke images from Japanese folklore and, according to the critic Shimizu Masahi, a sense of “having seen them

\textsuperscript{11} Hayao Miyazaki, “Chihiro in a Strange World: The Aim of This Film,” in The Art of Spirited Away (Tokyo: Studio Ghibli, 2001), p. 14. It should be noted that throughout this book and its companion volume, Roman arubamu: Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 2001), Miyazaki’s conscious agenda is very clear. In fact, the Roman arubamu contains a section entitled “Chihiro o sagashite: ikyō e to mukau tabi” (Looking for “Chihiro,” a journey toward the Other World) which includes photographs and descriptions of places in Japan that supposedly inspired the film, including bathhouses, Shintō shrines, and festival sites, accompanied by the message that if “we only concentrated our eyes for just a little while, we too [like Chihiro] would find nearby the trap that opens in our accustomed landscape. Searching for Chihiro, let us travel too toward the entrance of the mysterious town [fushigi na machi]” (p. 128).


somewhere before.” Overall, to its enormous Japanese audience, the movie’s special allure may be found in its ability to satisfy what Ivy calls the two “horizons of desire” on the part of contemporary Japanese: the desire to encounter the unexpected, the peripheral unknown, even the frightening . . . a desire that reveals itself under the controlled and predictable conditions of everyday life under consumer capitalism,” and “an opposite longing to return to a stable point of origin, to discover an authentically Japanese Japan that is disappearing yet still present.”

Spirited Away plays on this sense of nostalgia for the unexpected and the peripheral in a way that is embodied by what Figal describes as a “critical nostalgia in relation to the contemporary world.” This form of nostalgia privileges the (literally) ghostly past as an alternative to the mundane present and, as Figal demonstrates, can be expressed by a tendency to “fetishize the fantastic, reifying fragments of fushigi into whole cultural manifestations that could then be identified as authentically Japanese.” Another form of nostalgia the film expresses might be called “activist nostalgia,” in that the film’s agenda actively calls for the revitalization of modern Japan through a renewed awareness of culturally specific virtues and values and a concomitant realization of their vulnerability.

Miyazaki’s vision of Japanese traditional culture is clearly related to the notion of the furusato, a term that, as Robertson explains, is linked to the word “furui” (old) signifying pastness, historicity, age, quaintness, and the patina of familiarity and naturalness that cultural artifacts and human relationships acquire with age, use, and interaction.” This is seen most obviously in the idyllic farming community of Totoro with its charmingly “haunted house” that becomes the protagonists’ home. It also appears passingly in the visualization of the village of outsider “Emishi” that the young hero Ashitaka is forced to leave at the beginning of Princess Mononoke. In Totoro and Mononoke, however, the furusato may be seen as compensatory, in that it is presented as unambiguously welcoming (albeit imbued with just the right degree of subtle hints of mystery and strangeness) and comfortably separated from the “real” world of modern Japan. In contrast, the other world of Spirited Away initially seems both threatening and threatened, fearsome in its aggressively fantastical nature, but at the same time dangerously vulnerable to cultural pollution from various forms of otherness.

This brings us to the second part of the question regarding the “success” of Miyazaki’s recreation of the past or, at least, a stable point of origin. It is certainly true that the bathhouse, which is the most obvious marker of the

15. Ivy, Discourses of the Vanishing, p. 105.
Japanese past, is an extraordinary creation whose bright colors, detail, and sheer imposing physical presence attest to its representational power. Two aspects of the bathhouse, however, undermine its apparent promise of easy cultural recovery or even stability. The first is its liminality and marginality. The fact that the entire action of *Spirited Away* takes place within three liminal contexts—a journey (specifically, a move from an old home to a new one), an abandoned theme park, and, finally, the fantasy other world—suggests that in this film the *furusato* has become both alienated and phantasmatic, in the sense that Ivy defines “phantasm” as “an epistemological object whose presence or absence cannot be definitely located.”  

In this sense, the bathhouse is representative less of the *furusato* than of the complex modernity that has taken over the *furusato* and estranged it from the “authentic Japanese identity” with which it is supposedly linked. As is the case with both Figal’s and Ivy’s examples, the bathhouse is not a simple escape from or rejection of modernity but, as Figal says of the fantastic in Meiji Japan, “part and parcel of modernity” itself. To the contemporary heroine Chihiro, the bathhouse is not only liminal, but marginal as well, a defamiliarized realm that requires fantastic intervention to intrude itself onto her consciousness. The problematic nature of the bathhouse is underscored by Miyazaki’s insertion of characters into the film who do not belong in traditional folklore, most importantly the phantom known as No Face. This disturbing figure, who becomes a signifier of excess and carnival gone out of control, suggests a disequilibrium at the heart of the contemporary Japanese psyche that may not easily be overcome.

*Spirited Away* uses a variety of narrative strategies to suggest ways to challenge the disequilibrium it illustrates so vividly. These include what might be called archetypal approaches to cultural recovery such as recognition, proper identification, spiritual cleansing, and sacrifice in order to renew the collectivity. In terms of the film’s basically upbeat structure, these approaches come across as successful. But the bathhouse’s simultaneous carnivalesque and the chaotic suggests that the threats to the collectivity are not simply outside ones. While *Spirited Away*’s narrative structure seems to privilege a fairly basic vision of cultural rehabilitation, inviting its audience to join in a celebration of unique and endearing forms of Japanese tradition, the film’s content, imagery, and ending problematize and sometimes even undermine such an essentialist vision.

On the one hand, the film is a work of “cultural boundedness” in terms of Simon Harrison’s description of a collectivity that defines itself through its symbolic practices that specifically differentiate the community from others (in this case, the privileging of the bathhouse and its associations with

purity). On the other hand, through the use of the alienating and impure presence of Chihiro and others, Spirited Away suggests the fundamental permeability of boundaries, evoking a liminal world of uncertainty, loss, constantly changing identities, and abandoned simulacra, where old truths and patterns no longer seem to hold and where the deep-seated desire to return home may never be fulfilled.

Miyazaki’s brilliant use of the medium of animation serves Spirited Away’s complex diegesis particularly effectively. While the story line is fairly conventional, the film’s dreamlike colors and imagery and themes of metamorphosis, doubling, and the uncanny would be difficult, if not impossible, to realize in a live-action work. Furthermore, the liminal elements in the film resonate with the animated medium. “Liminality,” Turner’s “betwixt and between condition,” is a threshold state (the literal meaning of the word is “threshold”) associated with aspects of ritual, initiation, and even, in its public setting, carnival, in the Bakhtinian sense of “a place that is not a place and a time that is not a time” in which one can “don the liberating masks of liminal masquerade.”* The liminal world is disordered and amorphous and those who enter it, however briefly, are invariably changed by their sojourn within.

While many if not most of the great texts of all cultures deal with ritual and initiation, the world of animation, a medium that privileges metamorphosis and fluidity and explicitly deals with the nonreferential (as opposed to live-action film or photography), is itself suggestive of a “betwixt and between state” clearly demarcated from most notions of the “real.” At its most creative, as Miyazaki’s comment on opening up the brain to create fantasy suggests, animation can tap effortlessly into the dreamworld of subconscious archetypes, allowing its characters free rein to construct new forms of subjectivity and identity. Unlike the urge toward mimesis in live-action film, animation can allow a deeper form of reality to appear.

Traditionally, liminality has been associated with both sexes, from young male heroes such as those described in Joseph Campbell’s Hero of a Thousand Faces* who undergo various forms of initiation rites, to the Bacchae of ancient Greece or the shamans of premodern Japan who exist for sporadic periods outside of mainstream culture. Recently, however, the notion of the female rather than the male as the conduit into liminality has become more ubiquitous, especially in Japanese culture, with the ascendance of the figure of the shōjo. The shōjo, as John Treat describes her, is a “barely and thus ambiguously pubescent woman” (pubescence itself is of course a clearly liminal

state), who is attached to what could well be called a “betwixt and between culture”—what Treat describes as the so-called “kawaii” or “cute” world made up of “cousins, boyfriends, and favorite pets,”23 as well as stuffed animals and related paraphernalia such as “Hello Kitty,” whose cuteness has taken on almost iconic significance in the leisure world of young Japanese. Treat’s work profiles the young female characters in the writings of the popular writer Yoshimoto Banana, whom he sees as linked to a dream world of free-floating nostalgia. Similar descriptions might also be applied to the writer Murakami Haruki’s young female characters who, in works such as Dance Dance Dance and The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, act as intermediaries to worlds of transitory otherness that can be both appealing and terrifying.24

While the shōjo has become a ubiquitous cultural staple in Japanese society and literature over the last two decades, she is a particularly crucial figure in the related media of anime and manga, both of which contain genres specifically devoted to the shōjo. Treat’s article, written in the late 1980s, discusses treatments of the shōjo figure that seem essentially positive since they situate the shōjo as a liberating site of play and joyous consumerism, offered as an alternative to the pressure-cooker existence of the ordinary Japanese male’s existence. More recently, however, anime and manga have treated the shōjo in infinitely darker and more complex terms, from the battling shōjo (sentōbi shōjo) Utena who wants to change the world in Revolutionary Girl Utena (Shōjo kakumei Utena, 1977; dir. Ikuhara Kunihiko), to the haunted, death-ridden figures of Asuka Langley and Ayanami Rei in Neon Genesis Evangelion (Shinseiki ebuangerion, 1996; dir. Anno Hideaki).25 Perhaps most distinctive of all is Lain, the young heroine of Serial Experiments Lain (1998; dir. ABe Yoshitoshi), whose English-language theme song containing the words “I am falling/I am fading” hints at a subjectivity that may simply disappear—a condition echoed by Chihiro in an early


24. Not only is the figure of the shōjo distinctively involved with high and pop culture, young Japanese women are seen as going through a socially liminal stage which is largely inaccessible to young men. Researchers such as Satsuki Kawano and Winston Davis have pointed out that young Japanese women “experience a period of liminality between high school and marriage, when they participate in ‘rituals of refinement’ [such as learning the tea ceremony, taking English lessons, and traveling] to prepare for marriage.” Satsuki Kawano, “Gender, Liminality and Ritual in Japan: Divination Among Single Tokyo Women,” Journal of Ritual Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1995), p. 68. Although these women are beyond the age usually associated with the shōjo, the fact that this initiation period is connected with activities that are essentially pleasurable and not directly linked to productive economic activity connects them to what Treat calls the “uniquely unproductive culture” of the shōjo. See also Winston Davis, Dojo: Magic and Exorcism in Modern Japan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

25. For a recent discussion of the shōjo in Japanese popular culture, see Pop Culture Critique, Shōjotachi no senreki, No. 2 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1998).
episode in *Spirited Away* in which her body literally begins to vanish in front of her.

Why this problematization of the *shōjo* character has occurred is open to interpretation, but I would suggest that it has to do with an increasing sense of vulnerability and fragility on the part of the Japanese toward their own culture in the 1990s as the economic juggernaut that had powered Japan through most of its postwar years began to sputter and collapse. In this climate of social, economic, and political instability, the iconic figure of a vulnerable young girl, either fighting back or internalizing various dark psychological problems, may have had particular cultural resonance. Furthermore, the liminal condition of the young girl may be seen as a metaphor for Japanese society which, over the last decade, seems to be increasingly in limbo, drifting uneasily away from the values and ideological framework of the immediate postwar era. It might also be noted that the image of the young girl evokes certain crucial aspects of Japanese cultural tradition. The tenth-century *Genji monogatari*, the most important text in premodern Japanese literature, is dominated by images of young girls on the cusp of adolescence and ends with a vision of a troubled young girl casting herself into the waters of the Uji River, another liminal image. In the indigenous Shintō religion, especially before the introduction of Buddhism, shrine maidens (*miko*) had an important shamanic function as mediators to the gods.

In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro may be seen as having shamaness-like aspects as she deals with the gods inside the fantasy bathhouse, mediating between a variety of liminal worlds. Much in the same way Mary Schmidt describes the shaman’s initiatory process, Chihiro must confront a world in which “all is chaos and dismaying juxtaposition. Everything that the child holds to be true and natural is transformed.”26

Chihiro’s own liminality is echoed and amplified in the strange world of the bathhouse. The bathhouse itself is a liminal entity, its condition exemplified most obviously by the fact that its business revolves around transients, its fantastic clientele who are always coming and going. Connected also to the world of the *mizu shobai* (literally “water business” but in this case referring to entertainers and prostitutes associated with the more unsavory kinds of bathhouses found in red-light districts throughout Japan), the bathhouse is socially liminal as well, evocative of the underground aspects of Japanese society. On a symbolic level, the bathhouse is also associated with a significant liminal substance, water. Not only is it surrounded by water (Chihiro has to cross a bridge to get to it and later must leave the bathhouse by boat) but, as a bathhouse, its function is of course totally dependent on water. Not surprisingly, water in its cleansing and purifying function plays a major role in the film.

Other signs of liminality include the architecture of the bathhouse and that of its environs, a dazzling bricolage which includes elements of Meiji and Tokugawa temple architecture mixed with Chinese restaurant styles and even, as Shimizu points out, touches of the grotesque visions of Peter Breughel and Hieronymous Bosch, capturing the mix-and-match in-betweeness of modern Japan. Furthermore, the bathhouse and its denizens appear at twilight (a liminal period), and some of its inhabitants shift identities (Turner’s “liminal masquerade”), suggesting the flux of identity that characterizes contemporary industrial societies. Finally, as is typical of liminal sites, it is a place of ritual and initiation where Chihiro loses her original identity and is forced to undergo a variety of trials before constructing a new, more powerful form of subjectivity, which enables her to achieve the purging of the bathhouse in several significant episodes.

Before turning to these episodes, it is worth examining the opening scenes in detail, as they establish some of the most important themes of the film. Spirited Away begins as Chihiro and her family are on the move from their old home to a new one. Lolling dispiritedly in the back of the family’s shiny new Audi, the ten-year-old Chihiro shows no interest in the move, in marked contrast to the robust and enthusiastic young heroines of Miyazaki’s earlier Totoro. Furthermore, Chihiro’s initial encounters with the magical other world are marked both by the threatening quality of that world and by her own terrified response to it, again in notable contrast to Totoro where the young girls’ encounter with a mysterious but essentially benign other world shows them reacting with enthusiasm and confidence. If Spirited Away can be seen as in some ways a darker updating of Totoro, Chihiro’s problematic character is particularly disturbing, suggesting a presence that is disconnected not only from her environment and her parents, but also from herself.

Insisting on taking a “short cut,” Chihiro’s father soon gets lost and is forced to stop the car in front of a tunnel that leads to what is apparently an abandoned theme park. While Chihiro hangs back reluctantly, clinging to her impatient mother, the father rushes ahead on foot to explore, ultimately...

27. Shimizu, Miyazaki Hayao o yomu, p. 18.

28. The basic narrative pattern of Spirited Away is intriguingly reminiscent of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century novella Koya hijiri (The saint of Mount Koya) by one of Japan’s greatest fantasists, Izumi Kyoka. In Koya hijiri, a young monk on a journey through the mountains takes an “old road” that leads him to a magical valley dominated by an enchantress who turns men into animals. As in Spirited Away, the magical valley may be viewed as a place of resistance to modernization, a place where the suppressed ghosts of the past present an uncanny alternative to an increasingly alienating present. (See Susan Napier, The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity [London: Routledge, 1996].) Spirited Away also evokes aspects of Greek myths and tales such as The Odyssey (like Odysseus, Chihiro is on a journey home when her companions are turned into pigs) and the story of Persephone (whose eating of the magic pomegranate seeds dooms her to stay in Hades six months out of every year), but the notion of a collective Japanese unconscious emblemized by the fantastic and the hidden links the film particularly to the Kyoka story.
discovering a mysteriously empty but fully operational restaurant from which emanate tantalizingly delicious aromas. Cutting off Chihiro’s remonstrations by saying, “It’s okay. I’ve got a credit card,” the father convinces the mother to partake as well, while Chihiro wanders off in frustration. As twilight falls, she comes upon a massive body of water and suddenly sees the bathhouse looming in front of her, at which point she also encounters a mysterious young boy (whom the audience later finds is named Haku and who works for Yubaba, the old witch who runs the bathhouse), who warns her to leave immediately.

Upon returning to the restaurant, however, Chihiro finds that her parents have turned into enormous pigs who grunt and fall insensibly on the floor beside her. Running away in horror, she discovers that her own body is starting to vanish in front of her eyes, a literal embodiment of disconnection. Just at the point when her body has almost completely faded away, she is saved by Haku who gives her a magical food that returns her to corporeality. Haku also tells her that the only way of rescuing her parents is to ask for work at the bathhouse and accept whatever task is given to her. Although terrified, Chihiro does as she is told, finally convincing Yubaba to take her on, even though the bathhouse is technically off limits to humans, who are looked down upon because of their stench. Her employment comes at a price, however: she must relinquish her real name, Chihiro, and henceforth only be known as “Sen,” the first character in her name. Furthermore, as she will discover later, her jobs—cleaning out the filthiest of the tubs and bathing the filthiest of the clients—are the most arduous tasks in the bathhouse, a form of ritual hazing of the newcomer. Ultimately, however, Chihiro accomplishes these tasks with flying colors and goes on to more personal successes as well.

From the opening shots of Chihiro’s sullen family in the Audi, Miyazaki is clearly setting up a contrast between a materialistic and deterritorialized modern Japan and a more authentic indigenous Japan and doing so in a far more critical style than anything in his previous works. Not only are the parents shown as dependent on credit cards and imported cars, they are also completely insensitive to their daughter—the mother’s only reaction to Chihiro’s fears as they venture through the tunnel is to tell her not to “cling so much.” They are also obsessed with consumption, either of material goods or the magical food. It is appropriate that their orgy of consumption should turn them into pigs, who have lost all memory of their human existence.29

29. Miyazaki insists that the choice of pigs for the parents’ metamorphosis was completely haphazard, insisting that “they could have turned into camels or anything” (program guide, twelfth page), but this insistence seems somewhat disingenuous given that Miyazaki had already used a partial pig transformation in his earlier film Porco Rosso (Kurenai no buta, 1992). Because of the film’s emphasis on pollution and consumption, it would seem that the pig is a particularly appropriate object of transformation. Since Miyazaki explicitly acknowledges the influence of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, it might further be noted that Carroll’s fantasy also contains a scene of a human (in this case a baby) transforming into a pig.
The parents’ fate is especially interesting when one considers that parents and most other authority figures in Miyazaki’s oeuvre are invariably depicted with respect, suggesting an unprecedented toxicity between the generations in Spirited Away. The whiny and sullen Chihiro also stands in strong contrast to virtually every other Miyazaki child protagonist. Her virtual “vanishing,” followed by the loss of her name, seems appropriate, given her rather feeble and negatively defined subjectivity at the beginning of the film. These early identity threats presage a major theme of the film, the threat to and the need to recover one’s authentic identity. But Chihiro’s refusal to join her parents in their eating orgy which allows her to escape their porcine fate already suggests an inner moral or at least ascetic strength which will prove useful in her coming trials in the bathhouse.

The world of the bathhouse initially appears to stand in contrast to the deterritorialized modern world of consumption and materialism. Its structure and organization, a vertical hierarchy based on teamwork, suggests prewar Japanese social structures, such as the ie or extended household (as well as modern Japanese corporations). But the bathhouse may evoke other associations. The fact that it is ruled by a woman who resides at the top of the bathhouse hints at links to the matriarchal culture of early Japan, out of which came the indigenous Shintō myth of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, the progenitrix of the imperial family. Indeed, as Shimizu points out, the film is dominated by powerful female presences who, besides Chihiro and Yubaba, also include Yubaba’s kinder twin sister, Zeniba, and Chihiro’s confidante, the bath attendant Lin. Even Haku, who is the most important male figure in the story, has a suggestively androgynous appearance and, as the audience discovers at the end, is actually a river god and thus associated with the feminine principle of water.

The predominance of femininity may also be linked with the notion of the furusato which, as Robertson points out, involves a “tenacious equation of females and native place.” Furthermore, the bathhouse with its associations with water, and its all-encompassing dreamlike quality, may well be suggestive of the Lacanian imaginary, the preverbal state when the infant still sees itself as one with the mother. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Chihiro’s first venture into the bathhouse involves going down an immense flight of stairs into the womblike furnace room.

30. In fact, Chihiro’s initial encounter with liminality almost brings about the opposite fate to her parents, her literal “wasting away.” Her virtual vanishing may perhaps be seen as related to a lack of spiritual and emotional nourishment from her parents. For example, in the scene in the car, she complains that all her father has ever given her is a “single rose” for her birthday (in comparison to the large bouquet her friends give her as a going away present).
31. Shimizu, Miyazaki Hayao o yomu, p. 93.
The bathhouse organization privileges traditionally sanctioned virtues such as endurance and hard work, as seen by the fact that the only way Chihiro can rescue her parents is by taking whatever job is offered to her, no matter how burdensome. Chihiro must also relinquish her name and identity, suggesting that she must subordinate herself to the group, another value connected with indigenous Japanese social structures such as the prewar ie, or extended family. Finally, the jobs she is given evoke the teachings of the native Shintō religion, one of whose central tenets is the cleansing of pollution.

Miyazaki’s vision, however, is more complex than a simple bifurcation between an empty materialist contemporary Japan and an idealized traditional Japan. This is first demonstrated by the fact that the real world of Japan and the fantasy world of Japanese tradition are separated not simply by a tunnel but by a third liminal version of Japan, the abandoned theme park. The film contextualizes the role of the theme park by having Chihiro's father tell the family that it must have been built during the 1990s economic “bubble” only to be abandoned when the bubble collapsed. It is surely no accident that the parents’ orgy of credit-card approved consumption takes place inside the theme park, evoking the orgy of material consumption that characterized the 1980s and 1990s. The theme park can thus be seen as a simulacrum of recent Japanese history, a history that, since it is emblematized by a theme park, is essentially inauthentic, evocative of Appadurai’s “warehouse of cultural scenarios.” The fact that Chihiro must go through the theme park to reach the fantastic world of the bathhouse suggests that a form of voyage through the recent Japanese past and an understanding of its essentially illusory or phantasmic quality is necessary before she can approach the genuinely fantastic world of the bathhouse where, paradoxically, the “real” values of Japan still exist. The bathhouse’s rather ambiguous relationship to the theme park is intriguing here, suggesting that the bathhouse is also, to some degree, linked with the bubble economy.33

Chihiro’s lack of interest in the theme park, compared to the enthusiasm of her parents, may be interpreted as healthy sign, while her near vanishing and the forced shedding of her name can be seen as part of her voyage toward self-renewal and, potentially, of cultural renewal as well. But Chihiro’s further adventures in the bathhouse demonstrate that cultural renewal is not easily accomplished. The bathhouse too is menaced by transgressive and

33. Jennifer Robertson discusses the boom in making “native place theme parks” in the 1980s and characterizes the boom as “responsible for and symptomatic of the loss of cultural artifacts and practices identified retrospectively as constituting the essence of furusato” (Robertson, “It Takes a Village,” p. 118). Miyazaki has stated that his inspiration for Spirited Away’s abandoned theme park was the Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum in the suburbs of Tokyo. He may also have derived inspiration for the interior of the bathhouse from Gajoen, an enormous wedding hall in downtown Tokyo.
polluting forces. While Chihiro’s iconic shōjo status suggests that she may be equated with the Japanese psyche, the bathhouse and its denizens also clearly represent aspects of the Japanese soul.

This is manifest in two important episodes that take place within the bathhouse revolving around the trope of cultural pollution. The first begins with Chihiro receiving the repellent task of bathing a mysterious customer known as the Stink God. Literally an animated pile of brown filth that looks suspiciously like excrement (and clearly smells abominable as well), the Stink God’s filthy condition seems almost intractable. It is only when Chihiro discovers something that she describes as a “thorn” (toge) and convinces her fellow bath attendants to help her pull it out that the condition begins to ameliorate. It turns out that the “thorn” is a rusted bicycle handlebar which is in turn attached to various other pieces of manmade junk. As the group pulls more forcefully, the pile of pieces ultimately becomes untangled and the Stink God is revealed to be a river spirit, finally freed from the pollution and detritus of modern life. Assuming the visage of a nō mask of an old man (okina), the spirit intones “That’s good!” and disappears in an arc of shimmering water, having thanked Chihiro by giving her a magical food.

This scene is significant in a number of ways. First, it has obvious ritualistic aspects—Chihiro as the “new girl” is forced to deal with an immense and unpleasant task at which she succeeds brilliantly, earning the approval of her fellow bath attendants and helping to develop her own confidence, symbolized by the gift of the river god. At one point in the cleansing process, she herself is plunged into the filthy bath water, hinting that Chihiro needs to confront her own impurities in order to grow and ultimately transcend the liminal state.

But the scene is also crucial as a form of cultural commentary. Simon Harrison has suggested that “discourses of cultural pollution” are one way of constructing cultural identity by representing the group identity as “threatened by invasion and replacement by others.” Initially Chihiro herself is the invader with her “human stench” but, by acquiescing to the dictates of the group, she begins to be accepted and ultimately integrates into her new collectivity. The Stink God also appears as an invader at the beginning, its filth and odor threatening everything the bathhouse represents. Its successful cleansing becomes not only a rite of purification but an exercise in recognition and correct identification.

34. Kiridoshi describes this food as a “dumpling” (dango) (Kiridoshi Risaku, Miyazaki Hayao no sekai [Tokyo: Chikuma Shinsho, 2001], p. 326). Like the rice balls Chihiro eats in a subsequent scene, dango are a homey food linked to Japanese traditions such as flower viewing. The foul-tasting dango thus can be seen as a wholesome alternative to the consumption patterns of Chihiro’s parents and No Face.

The fact that the reidentified god then takes on the visage of a no mask, a signifier of Japanese high cultural tradition, makes the equation between the environment and the Japanese psyche very clear and also suggests a spiritual element. The sacralization of the river is part of Shintō doctrine which sees the potential for the sacred in all things, but it is interesting that Chihiro refers to the bicycle handlebar as a “thorn,” a word suggestive perhaps of Christ’s crucifixion or at least of martyrdom in general. In fact, in a commentary on Spirited Away, Miyazaki specifically states that, “I really believe that the river gods of Japan are existing in that miserable, oppressed state. It is not only the humans who are suffering on these Japanese islands.” Despoiled by modern civilization, the river has become a sacrifice to consumer capitalism, another vision of matter out of place embodied in the detritus clogging the river.

We may read the scene with the river god as a successful attempt at recovery on a variety of levels. It suggests cultural renewal by the fact that the threatened pollution is not only cleansed away but is found to contain within it a symbol of traditional Japanese culture, the no mask. On a sociocultural level, this success is underlined by views of the bath attendants cheering and waving fans with the Japanese rising sun imprinted on them. Finally, on a mythic level, the episode’s structure of misidentification followed by revelation, while typical of many archetypal myths concerning a disguised god, is also evocative of a specific Japanese miracle story in which the Empress Kōmyō bathed a thousand lepers to discover that the final one was the Buddha in disguise.

While the episode of the Stink God, although initially carnivalesque and chaotic, ends on a note of cultural reaffirmation and containment, the second narrative involving cultural pollution is far more disturbing. This is the story of No Face (Kao Nashi), the black-garbed, white-visaged phantom whom Chihiro finds hovering outside in the rain (another liminal element, as is No Face’s ghostly quality itself) and invites into the bathhouse. Like the river god, No Face is also originally misidentified but in this case in a positive fashion since Chihiro believes it to be one of the bathhouse guests. While the creature seems initially kindly disposed (at least to Chihiro), it soon takes on a threatening role within the bathhouse. Voraciously hungry, the creature tempts the bath attendants with gold pieces to bring it more and more food, growing in size and developing a sharp set of teeth, thus becoming a literal monster of consumption even to the point of swallowing several of the bath attendants.

36. As theater, no is also a liminal art form whose dramas usually take place on the boundaries between the spirit and the human worlds. These dramas often revolve around problems of misidentification and a need to work through issues from the past, not unlike some of the themes in Spirited Away.

37. Miyazaki Hayao, Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi (program guide), thirteenth page.
No Face is perhaps the most intriguing character in the film. Originally intended to be in only one scene (when Chihiro passes it on the bridge to the bathhouse), its role was expanded enormously when the original screenplay for *Spirited Away* was deemed too long. The creature is exemplary, therefore, of an unplanned element from Miyazaki’s unconscious.

Characterized by emptiness and absence, No Face reminds us of John Treat’s statement that “the idea of emptiness, both as one associated with *shōjo* culture and Japanese postmodernity in general, is probably, alongside commodity, the key term in contemporary Japanese cultural criticism today.” Kiridoshi has described it as a figure with the defeatist characteristics of the contemporary world, possessing no real sense of self and unable to communicate effectively. Voiceless, it must swallow others in order to speak, and it lives only to consume, evoking Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guttari’s point about the “primitive territoriality” of food. On the one hand, its emptiness and desire seem to signify the contemporary soul, but its increasingly grotesque body suggests a return of repressed Japanese tradition in the form of the monstrous.

As with the Stink God, Chihiro is called in to deal with the incipient chaos, although this time her presence is demanded because of her special relationship to No Face and her perceived competence in handling the creature, evidence that she has already progressed considerably in her initiatory process. In fact, she does live up to expectations, first chiding No Face for its boorish behavior, thus offering it a moral framework that the greedy bath attendants had failed to provide. When that fails, she gives it half of the magical food that the river god had given her and which she had hoped to use to transform her parents back to normal. The subsequent scene in which the gigantic No Face, having eaten the magic dumpling, races through the bathhouse, regurgitating both food and bath attendants, is a tour de force that is both comic and grotesque, a nightmarish vision of excess unprecedented in any previous Miyazaki film. Chihiro’s ability to contain this excess (she not only calms down No Face but manages to lure him away from the bathhouse to help rescue Haku) attests to her increasing empowerment, both in terms of confidence and in moral and spiritual growth, since she is brave enough to stand up to No Face and self-sacrificing enough to offer him the magic talisman.

Both the episode with the Stink God and the one with No Face may be read as examples of trial and initiation which Chihiro successfully

38. Treat, “Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home,” p. 301. Also see Shimizu, *Miyazaki Hayao o yomu*, pp. 75–77, for a discussion of No Face as a symbol of modern humanity.

39. Kiridoshi, *Miyazaki Hayao no sekai*, p. 325. He also quotes Miyazaki’s comment, “No Face is in all of us” (p. 325).

overcomes by expelling unclean matter from the collectivity. Chihiro herself clearly matures in these scenes to the point where her next trial, the rescuing of Haku from Zeniba, is one she takes on independently. From this point of view, the two episodes might be viewed as traditional rite-of-passage narratives in which an individual's development is equated with the renewal of culture as a whole.

Other aspects in these scenes, however, hint at a less seamless trajectory of spiritual and cultural recovery on the part of Miyazaki's cultural imaginary. These aspects include most importantly the grotesque and scatological nature of each episode, specifically the Stink God's link to excrement, No Face's link to vomitus, and both entities' connection to excess consumption. The episode with the Stink God deals with this in an essentially reassuring manner. It is not the river deity's fault that it has become so polluted by the excess of capitalist consumption as to take excretory form and, when it returns to its true nature at the end of the bath, its statement "That's good" clearly suggests catharsis. Even so, the bathhouse denizens' helpless horror which initially greets the god's visual and olfactory excess, while played for comedy, lends the bathhouse an aura of vulnerability and even powerlessness, surprising in a place whose major function is to deal with pollution of all kinds.

Compared to the successful resolution of the Stink God, No Face's story is a far more problematic one. A creature whose excessive appetite brings chaos to the collectivity, it may be seen as exemplifying what David Larsen writing on South Park describes as "an excremental ethic of obese consumption and non-utilitarian expenditure." Animated only by desire—for food and for Chihiro's presence—the creature's monstrous orgy of consumption followed by regurgitation is truly menacing. Miyazaki makes No Face all the more grotesque by capturing these scenes from a low angle, making the creature appear even more overwhelming as its distended black body fills the screen, shoveling down food from what appear to be monstrous platters.

Thus, what might have been a carnivalesque banquet scene, on the lines of the festive denouement of the river god's crisis, becomes a genuinely transgressive vision of consumption without pleasure or meaning. If the river god may be seen as representing a soiled but still potentially vibrant traditional Japan, No Face suggests a Japan that is out of control, lacking in subjectivity, unable to connect with others and animated only by the empty urge to consume. Other infantile characters exist as well, most notably Yubaba's grotesquely gigantic baby who also is motivated only by the most

41. For more on the subject of the cathartic aspect of this scene, see Kiridoshi, Miyazaki Hayao no sekai, p. 323.
basic of desires, suggesting that transgressive consumption is already part of the bathhouse culture.

No Face’s orgy of excess is ultimately contained, allowing the film’s final message to be one of somewhat guarded optimism for the survival and even perhaps the renewal of traditional culture. The agent of this renewal is, of course, Chihiro, transformed from her earlier apathetic and dependent self (not, perhaps, so different from No Face in certain respects) at the beginning of the film to a figure of moral authority and courage by the end.

Intriguingly, Chihiro’s own metamorphosis is also linked to consumption, although in a positive manner. We may remember that it is her eating of the magical food object given her by Haku that rescues her from vanishing at the beginning of the film. Unlike the food that No Face voraciously consumes, however, it is clear from Chihiro’s pained expression as she eats it that the medicine is bitter and hard to swallow. The notion of bad-tasting food as redeeming is echoed in two later scenes. In the first, she compels No Face to eat half of the magical dumpling she had previously tasted and found bitter in order to stop his eating rampage, and in the second she restores Haku to life (and to human form) by forcing the other half of the dumpling down his throat as he lies unconscious. The message is obvious: it is through swallowing unpleasant medicine rather than indiscriminate gorging that the characters can develop and change.

But the “medicine” does not always have to be unpleasant. An even more significant episode of positive consumption occurs in a scene that, while early in the film, plays an important thematic role in the overall narrative. This is the scene immediately subsequent to Chihiro’s first encounter with her parents as pigs under Yubaba’s care: she and Haku have returned to the bathhouse garden where Haku gives her back her clothes and also returns a going away card from her friends that has her real name on it. Haku tells Chihiro that she must never forget her real name (which she had been on the verge of doing) or she will never return home. At this point Chihiro begins to break down, clearly in despair. Haku alleviates her distress, however, by bringing out some onigiri (rice balls) and telling her to eat them because “I’ve put a spell on them to make you feel better.” As tears roll down her cheeks, Chihiro consumes one rice ball after another. The next scene shows her back at the bathhouse hard at work so the viewer is clearly expected to believe that the onigiri have successfully revived her.

While the carnivalesque scenes of No Face’s grotesque consumption bring a postmodern quality to Spirited Away, this quiet scene of Chihiro

43. No Face’s fearsomeness and intensity are in some ways reminiscent of a traditional figure from Japanese horror known as the “avenging spirit.” This figure has been recently reappropriated in contemporary Japanese horror films, a genre whose current popularity is also suggestive of a society whose sense of cultural identity is in crisis. See Jay McRoy, ed., Japanese Horror Cinema (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 3–4.
eating the rice balls has a tremendous emotional depth, demonstrating the privileging of “traditional” values that forms the heart of the film and gives it its fundamental moral and emotional framework.\textsuperscript{44} The fact that the scene begins with Chihiro’s acknowledgment that she has almost forgotten her name reminds the viewer of her vulnerability to the erasure of identity, a reminder of the more graphic vision of her near vanishing at the beginning of the film. Like the magic food that Haku gives her in that scene, the onigiri also help her on the way to recovering a fuller subjectivity.

Henrietta Moore says, “forgetting and remembering are forms of aesthetic judgment since they connect to what the individual feels is good or desirable about themselves,”\textsuperscript{45} and the fact that Chihiro’s remembering is connected to the onigiri is crucial to the film’s theme of cultural recovery. At its most basic, the onigiri is clearly linked with home and, specifically, with the mother: rice is a staple part of the obentō or lunch box every Japanese child brings to school every day, and onigiri are particularly popular on family picnics and school expeditions. As Anne Allison points out, the obentō is not simply sustenance but an important cultural construct, evocative of a mother’s love for and efforts on behalf of her young child.\textsuperscript{46} We remember Chihiro’s lack of nurturance from her real mother, whose only response to Chihiro’s reaching for her in the tunnel is to admonish her not to “cling.”

It is only in the fantasy world of the bathhouse that Chihiro begins to receive proper nurturance. Even more important, this nurturance is intimately connected to a culturally specific food. The onigiri is made of rice, the staple of the Japanese diet, with a few flavored items added to it such as salty salmon or umeboshi (sour plum) and is often wrapped in seaweed. All these items of course not only evoke specific Japanese tastes but the Japanese topography of seas, rivers, and rice paddies. Simple and homey, the onigiri connotes the furusato. As such, it links with both authentic and specific memory (of Chihiro’s mother and home), and a more free-floating sense of nostalgia that the Japanese audience at least will inevitably perceive in culturally specific terms. The onigiri-eating episode thus becomes a classic representation of cultural boundedness, constructed as a vision of the restorative powers of eating pure, homey food to stand as counterpoint to the scenes of excess consumption that follow.

\textsuperscript{44} I have been told that this scene is a favorite among Japanese audiences and also that plastic onigiri were a popular merchandise tie-in with the film.


\textsuperscript{46} Anne Allison, “Producing Mothers,” in Anne Imamura, ed., Re-Imagining Japanese Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 145–46. It should be noted that Allison is speaking specifically about the obentō, a more elaborate lunch that is eaten daily at school. Chihiro’s more casual onigiri would be more likely to be eaten on a school expedition but I believe the same association with mother and security would apply.
It should be emphasized, however, that this scene occurs early in the movie and that the onigiri in the scene are as much about absence as about presence. Chihiro is alone, temporarily orphaned, and seemingly powerless. Like modern Japan itself, she seems constituted by loss and amnesia and surrounded by others with similar characteristics, most notably Haku who also cannot remember his real name. It is finally up to Chihiro to create presence out of absence, not only to recover her own vanishing self but also to help others recover their own genuine subjectivities.

The rest of the movie traces her success in this endeavor, which she accomplishes in a variety of ways: unearthing the true spirit of the river god, giving No Face a structure and a role, allowing Yubaba’s baby to explore a kinder and cuter subjectivity (significantly, Yubaba cannot recognize her transformed child until the film’s denouement), restoring Haku to life (and at the film’s end remembering Haku’s real name and identity which is that of a river spirit whom she had encountered when very young47), and recognizing the true kindness and gentleness in Yubaba’s alter ego, Zeniba. The film’s denouement revolves around one final form of recovery through recognition, the scene where Yubaba gives Chihiro a final trial to see if she can recognize her parents among a mass of pigs. That Chihiro passes the test, correctly recognizing that her parents are no longer among the pigs, attests to her new clarity of vision and signals that she may now begin the voyage home.

Although the ending of the film is definitely upbeat, it is still somewhat ambiguous. It is clear that Chihiro, in archetypally heroic fashion, has managed to contain and, at least for the moment, to resolve the postmodern excesses of excess consumption and cultural pollution that have threatened the cultural boundaries of the bathhouse. But it should be noted that No Face, the most openly transgressive entity in the film, while apparently a changed character, is left separate from the world of the bathhouse, as if its excessive nature might still return as a threat. Intriguingly, Zeniba’s house and surroundings, where No Face is left, have their own theme-park-type qualities—this time suggestive of a European fairy tale, evoking yet another form of simulacrum.

Moreover, in contrast to the resolutely upbeat endings in Miyazaki films such as Kiki’s Delivery Service, Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind, and the recent Howl’s Moving Castle, Spirited Away ends on an uneasy note of closure. It is uncertain how much Chihiro will retain from her adventure in the liminal world, since Miyazaki leaves it deliberately vague as to how

47. Once again, water plays an important part in the recognition scene with Haku. Not only is Haku himself a river spirit, but Chihiro now remembers that she encountered “him” when, as a child she fell in his stream and the waters carried her to safety. Thus, Chihiro herself is seen as associated with water and it may be that her recognition of Haku is also another step in her recognition of herself since Haku can be read as her male anima, without whom she is not a complete person.
much she will remember. The film makes it obvious that her parents have learned nothing from their experience. *Spirited Away* ends with the family once again in a liminal state, still on the move toward their new home.

The Japanese cultural critic, Azuma Hiroki, has criticized *Spirited Away* for being an example of what he calls (following the European philosopher Alexandre Kojève) the “animalizing postmodern.” By this he means that the characters have no interior life and are motivated only by animalistic cravings with no connection to the human community. Certainly No Face, most of the bathhouse attendants, and Yubaba and her baby can be described in that way, at least initially. But by the film’s end all these characters can be seen as acknowledging and even enjoying the need for human connection. Azuma also insists that the reasons behind Chihiro’s psychological transformation are not adequately presented, arguing that “the protagonist’s interior difficulties are never described”\(^\text{48}\) and that compared to other Miyazaki protagonists, Chihiro never comes to grips with her own problems and that her troubles are resolved simply through fortunate happenings.

I hope this essay has given sufficient evidence that in fact Chihiro’s troubles are memorably presented, although often through visual or nonverbal signs, such as her virtual fading away at the beginning of the film and her tearful eating of the *onigiri* after her traumatic encounter with her parents in the pigsty. I would also argue that her maturation process has been well documented in the episodes described above in which she gradually transforms from possessing only animalistic cravings to a genuine desire for connection as a member of the Japanese community and a willingness to help revive the collective health of the community.

The film leaves uncertain whether such cultural recovery outside of the fantasy world of the bathhouse is possible. On the one hand, Chihiro, on going through the tunnel once again, is still “clinging” to her mother. On the other hand, the viewer is distinctly shown that she is still wearing the talismanic hair tie that Zeniba and her friends wove for her. We might suspect that both Miyazaki and Chihiro have “opened the lids” of their brains to allow them entrance into the deep structures of the unconscious or the imaginary. What happens in these dark parts of the brain may not always be consciously remembered but may serve at some level to promote action in the real world.

Rosemary Jackson describes Martin Heidegger’s vision of the “uncanny” as “empty space produced by a loss of faith in divine images,”\(^\text{49}\) and a loss of faith—in itself if not in the divine—does indeed seem to characterize modern Japan. But in the uncanny world of *Spirited Away*, the space


is dizzyingly full. What may have begun as a dip into Miyazaki’s own unconscious seems to have become, if we can judge by the film’s popularity, a voyage that has resonated with the collective unconscious of millions of Japanese. It is also clear that, in Chihiro, Miyazaki has created a character who, when confronted with absence and despoilation on both personal and cultural levels, ultimately rises to the challenge. Henry Jenkins has said of the temporary state of childhood that it “becomes an emblem for our anxieties about the passing of time, the destruction of historical formations, or, conversely, a vehicle for our hopes for the future.”50 While Spirited Away ultimately refuses to provide a totally reassuring vision for the future, Chihiro’s trajectory from near dissolution to arguable empowerment enacts at least the potential for cultural recovery.

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