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Research Topic

The Influence of Japanese Social Culture on Animation:

Modernity and Consumerism in Spirited Away and *Kiki's Delivery Service*

Abstract: This paper will examine how the character development and the narrative expression in Hayao Miyazaki animation works are influenced by the social and cultural life of Japan during this time period with emphasis placed on the influence of social values work, consumption, competence and the need to be needed on the identity cognition of characters. In this paper, Spirited Away and *Kiki's Delivery Service* have been used as an example to analyze how animation transforms abstract social ideas into experiences that are felt by characters, space, and story.

It is also concerned with the development of the characters in these environments and the way their experiences mirror the contemporary social life. This paper explains how animation as a form of narration reacts to contemporary social issues in a gentle and metaphorical way. In doing that, the paper also provides an insight into the connection between the process of Japanese animation and the social culture.

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1. Introduction

Japanese animation is usually characterized by a great sense of imagination, emotions, and the portrayal of ordinary life. Nevertheless, the narrative and visual way of telling stories is firmly attached to the particular social and cultural circumstances. The post-war Japan was rapidly modernised, which resulted in the creation of the specific social structure and system of values, which were reflected through animation in a non-directive, non-realistic manner.

The animated works of Hayao Miyazaki are deeply conditioned by the contemporary Japanese society instead of directly displaying the real world, his films feature the habitual situations and understanding of self and the surrounding world, which gradually influence the lives and feelings of the characters as a part of their social reality.

Spirited Away and *Kiki's Delivery Service* are the two films employed in this study as prime examples of the topic under discussion. They explore how animation displays experiences of modern society through its characters, spaces, and storytelling, and the effect these elements have on the identity of the characters and their perception of themselves. The paper is based on the analysis of the narrative and visual elements of the two films and on how Miyazaki can transform abstract social concepts into concrete character experiences by means of the animation style that is gentle and metaphorical. In doing so, the study offers a way to understand the relationship between Japanese animation and the social and cultural context behind it.

2. Literature Review

The study of the Japanese animation in the academic field has been attracted more and more to the relationship between the Japanese animation and the

Japanese society after the Second World War, especially in the term of daily life, identity, and social fabric. Rather than judging animation as a pure fantasy, many scholars are convinced that animations works are a cultural industry that reflect and rethink the contemporary social realities. In his argument, Lamarre (2009) suggests that animated spaces tend to be systems where characters are made to exist in organized environment that are work and social rule infused. Animation in this respect does not set the background, but it creates an organized environment within which characters act and how they see their position in society.

Consumer culture and desire has been addressed in a number of studies as to how Japanese animation is responsive to current social pressure. According to Iwabuchi (2002), popular culture in Japan tends to relate the identity to the consumption, in which desire is significant in conceiving the sense of social identity. This process is generally depicted in animation using symbolic or exaggerated images. According to Cavallaro (2006), inner conflict and feelings of alienation are commonly expressed in anime in the form of transformation, excess, and fantasy. Animation allows viewers to gain emotional understanding into socially abstract pressures through these tricks of animation.

The films of Hayao Miyazaki are often cited in this body of research based on their anthropocentric view of today's society. Lamarre (2009) informs us that the animated worlds of Miyazaki are structured spaces where characters are constructed through work, service and responsibility systems.

Rather than a picture of modern society as an overt adversary, Miyazaki focuses on the role played by these social structures in the lives of individual feelings and personal development, especially among the young characters.

According to Napier (2018), in many of his stories, Miyazaki describes situations where characters lose their social positions for a while. In such cases, the concept of people being judged according to usefulness or productivity does not come into play, and this allows the characters to think differently about their identity. Combined, these studies give us a clear ground to analyse *Spirited Away* and *Kiki's Delivery Service* as animated films discussing modern identity, work and self.

3. Modern Japanese Life and Animation Expression

In Japan modernity is neither a process of pure Westernization, but is a hybrid affected by the explosion of urban development and war-time social systems creation. The social system produced by economic recovery is favorable to efficiency, order and division of labor. Cities over time started to act as systems where people were supposed to perform certain roles and where personal value was commonly measured by the utility of someone or the ability of someone to perform the job that they were supposed to.

In the modern world, there is a strong correlation between social identity and functional roles. Being a student or an office worker also comes with unspoken norms regarding ability and performance and it is these norms that may leave young people at a loss of how they self-perceive. Consumer culture in this case is not only a means for fulfilling economic demands but also a means through which people can express themselves and have a sense of belonging within a given society (Iwabuchi, 2002). Following the pop of the economic bubble, Japanese animation began to contemplate the problems of excessive consumption and self-alienation and now symbolic and exaggerated imagery is employed to express such psychological and social fears. This history provides an important cultural background to later creative endeavors.

It is in this context that Hayao Miyazaki devised a critical and more humanist approach to storytelling. Instead of dismissing the modern world out of hand, he focuses on the ways that an emphasis on efficiency, utility, and strict social structures may be a limiting factor in the development of human feelings and self-development. In his films, children and young people are often marginalised in these social systems and consequently their experiences make the issues within the current social structures come to the fore.

Animation is also important in pushing Miyazaki to reveal these social commentaries. Fantasy and visual story telling helps make complex social concepts more palatable and easier to digest. This imaginative style creates an important viewpoint when analysing films such as *Spirited Away* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

4. Consumerism and Identity in Spirited Away

In Spirited Away, individuals are presented in a systematised manner under the highly functional logic of society. Chihiro's parents' overconsumption of food symbolises their unrestrained pursuit of material possession,（Fig1） while No-Face's attempt to gain others' attention through money reflects the commodification of emotions under the logic of consumption. When desires become divorced from moderation and social connections, individuals' subjectivity and identity are gradually eroded: the transformation of Chihiro's parents into pigs and No-Face's reckless behaviour are not mere moral punishments, but rather consequences of the operation of consumption and desire on individuals. By visualising the link between desires and identity changes, the animation turns abstract consumption mechanisms into intuitive visual experiences, demonstrating the psychological predicament of individuals trapped in institutionalised and consumerist logic in modern society.

Fig. 1. Film still from *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001).

As the core narrative space, the Bathhouse more directly embodies the functionalised state of individuals within a system. Within its enclosed, highly efficient and hierarchical system of labour and consumption, every character is assigned a clear role, where work and obedience serve as the fundamental rules for maintaining order.

After entering the Bathhouse, Chihiro is stripped of her name and exists only under a substitute identity(Fig2), a narrative device that, as Napier (2018) argues, reflects the systematic erosion of individual identity within highly regulated social systems, reducing the subject to a functional and interchangeable unit of labour.
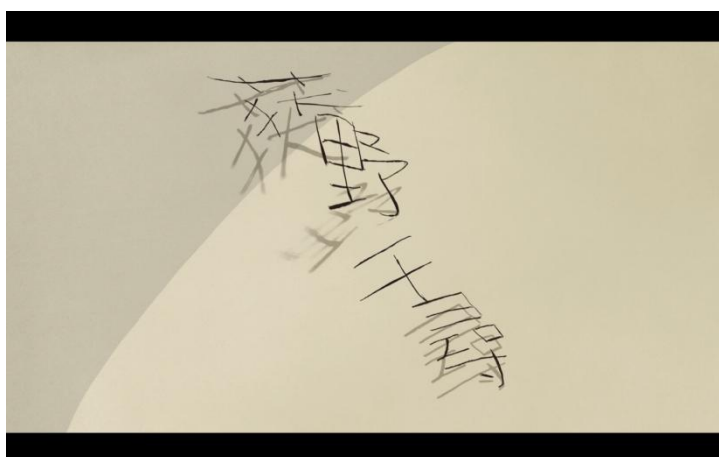

Fig. 2. Film still from *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001).

Through the juxtaposition of spatial structure and character predicaments, the animation concretises the conflict between modern social mechanisms and individual psychology, revealing the process through which subjectivity is compressed in a functionalised environment, and embodying Miyazaki's critical concern about the dehumanising nature of modern social structures.

5. Work, Ability, and Identity in *Kiki's Delivery Service*

Unlike the more alienated world shown in *Spirited Away*, the city in *Kiki's Delivery Service* appears gentle and welcoming. However, this friendly environment still follows modern social rules, in which social acceptance often depends on whether a person is socially useful.When Kiki first arrives in the city, she needs to find her place within society quickly. In this sense, her independent life is not only a journey of self-discovery, but also a process of taking on a social role in order to meet practical needs.

In the film, magic is presented as a form of labour rather than something purely personal. Kiki carries out her livelihood by utilizing her flying ability to help with delivery services and her value is closely associated with her performance at work.(Fig3) This focus on usefulness and efficiency puts an increasing amount of pressure on her and leads to a growing sense of doubt towards her self worth (Napier, 2018). When she is no longer able to use her powers effectively, she starts to question the meaning of her existence.

Fig. 3. Film still from *Kiki's Delivery Service* (Miyazaki, 1989).

The fact that Kiki loses her flight for a while is not a form of punishment in the story. Rather, it is a manifestation of a contemporary identity crisis as the value that a person places on his or her self-identity is intimately linked with utility and social reproductiveness (Napier, 2018). Once this system of outward judgement fails, people are forced to abandon their conception of efficiency and performance based standards, and rethink their connection with the world. In the case of Kiki, being deprived of her ability will enable her to stop relying on being needed, because of which the other people will not be able to see her, and it will enable her to understand that she is worthy as a person, not only as a valuable worker.

In the end, the regaining of the power Kiki has, is not a return of the past. It is rather a demonstration of new predisposition to the world based on her new interpretation of herself. In this process, *Kiki's Delivery Service* creates a change in living as a useful person in the eyes of others and a person with personal worth.

At the same time, the film shows how Hayao Miyazaki uses animation to respond to modern social issues related to work, ability, and identity in a gentle but clear way.

6. Conclusion

An analysis of *Spirited Away* and *Kiki's Delivery Service* shows that functional thinking and consumer culture in modern Japanese society strongly influence how characters, spaces, and stories are presented in Hayao Miyazaki's films (Napier, 2018). Rather than being shown as direct objects of criticism, modern social values appear in the characters' everyday choices and emotional experiences.Ideas related to work, consumption, ability, and being "needed" become important ways for characters to understand themselves and their place in society, and they gradually shape how the characters judge the meaning of their own lives.

Against this social and cultural background, Miyazaki does not directly reject or criticise modern society. Instead, he turns these social influences into part of the characters' growth through gentle and metaphorical storytelling.In *Spirited Away*, the portrayal of spaces related to work and consumption, and in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, the focus on work ability and self-worth, both show how social judgement enters everyday life and slowly appears in the characters' emotional changes.

This use of narrative technique enables one to observe the contemporary Japanese society and culture of consumerism's influence on the way Miyazaki films convey their messages. Social culture is not introduced as an outer theme, it is a part of the inner fabric of the stories, effecting the lives and development of the characters. As a result, audiences can gradually understand the effects of modern society through the characters' lives and emotions.

Word count: 1890 words

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Image list

Figure 1. *Spirited Away* [Film still] (2001) Directed by H. Miyazaki. Japan: Studio Ghibli.

Figure 2. *Spirited Away* [Film still] (2001) Directed by H. Miyazaki. Japan: Studio Ghibli.

Figure 3. *Kiki's Delivery Service* [Film still] (1989) Directed by H. Miyazaki.

Japan: Studio Ghibli.