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# *Spirited Away*

Negotiation between Capitalism and  
Reminiscent Environmental Ethics

WEERAYA DONSOMSAKULKIJ

“Enchanting,” “magical,” and “interconnecting” are words casually fitted to describe *Spirited Away*, the animation film about a mysterious world and childhood by the Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli. With charming features, this film has successfully captured attention from audiences around the globe. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Joe Morgenstern praised the film as bringing a profound pleasure as well as a sense of loss when the film was over (2002). Peter Bradshaw reviewed this film, in the *Guardian*, as something that left him feeling lighter than air (2003). In Thailand the film has been considered as one of the greatest Japanese animations at all time. In *Siamzone* the film has been admired for mirroring morality and commitment to family and friendship (2012). *Spirited Away* deserves all these compliments and much more.

The film’s narration follows the adventure of a ten-year-old girl named Chihiro Ogino, who steps into the realm of gods and spirits, which humans are not supposed to enter, with her parents when they are moving to their new home. In this dimension, her parents break the rules and are punished by being cursed and turned into pigs. In order to rescue her parents, Chihiro has to stay in this dimension and work at the steaming bathhouse run by the witch named Yubaba. Facing a number of challenging circumstances in this mysterious setting and with assistance from her spirit friends and coworkers, who appear in anthropomorphic form, Chihiro grows up from being a spoiled kid to being an understanding and responsible young woman.

Within the series of Chihiro's adventures to survive in this spiritual realm, friendship, love, and interconnectedness between Chihiro and one particular spirit, named Haku, are centrally portrayed. It is obvious that Chihiro and Haku have met each other before, as when Chihiro asks, "How do you know my name is Chihiro?" and Haku replies, "I have known you since you were very small." Yet this memory has been forgotten. It seems that being unable to remember plays a key role in this film. Yubaba controls her workers by stealing their names and leaving a part of their original names with them. In doing so, she gives them new names. For instance, after signing the work contract, Chihiro loses her name and is known as "Sen." This name stealing, as a part of the disremembering process, enslaves all workers in the bathhouse; and as long as they are unable to remember their original full names, they are forever chained to work for her and unable to leave the bathhouse.

Through this business of disremembering, symbolic capitalist elements, especially those concerning profit making and materialist greed, are on display and represented by Yubaba. For her, profit making and gold are the first priorities and even more precious than the well-being of her son. Yubaba uses a magical ability to make people forget in order to control them. Matter of heart and feelings are inferior to the matter of material wealth. However, while struggling to remember her name and save her parents, Chihiro learns about the life of environment, represented by Haku and other spirit characters. Chihiro helps release Haku from Yubaba's magical chain by remembering their first encounter in the Kohaku River, which is his original home and his full name, as the guardian spirit of the Kohaku River. This then reveals the reason why Kohaku ended up living in the bathhouse and serving Yubaba. He has lost his home, since the Kohaku River no longer exists. His river has been destroyed and replaced for the sake of the area development and apartment establishment. He was lost and had nowhere to go. Nevertheless, when he remembers his name and his place, he turns from a river dragon back into a boy in midair, and he is able to leave Yubaba and the bathhouse. Through Kohaku's transformation from animal-like form into humanlike form, one can see the hierarchical binary between humans and nonhumans, in which humans represent freedom as free actors and animals represent servitude as restricted actors. This is why when the spirit of the Kohaku River abandons his dragon form, he is emancipated from materialism and its greed. His human form

represents his freedom, and this happens because Chihiro remembers their past connection.

This situation refers to the Anthropocene, since even though humans cause oppressive tensions to the environment by neglecting its well-being in favor of capitalist development, they are also a key feature in releasing these tensions. This portrayal also implies environmental relations in Japanese society that have been lost during the capitalist industrialization. When Chihiro remembers the existence of the Kohaku River, the environmental relations of the past resurface and are, therefore, sustained. This signifies the urge to remember human relations to the environmental surroundings that have been overlooked under capitalism. Consequently, this remembrance brings forth environmental ethics to remind Japanese people of their interconnectedness to the natural environment that should not be forgotten—to remind the audience that nature has its own life and agency that may emerge in the form of spirits.

Moreover, Miyazaki cultivates anthropomorphism in *Spirited Away* to strengthen the mutual dependence between humans and the rest of nature and to highlight a personhood that the environment also possesses. As Jane Bennett argues, anthropomorphism functions against anthropocentrism by stressing the similarities and symmetries between humans and nonhumans: “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (2010, xvi). All these environmental reminders, in turn, also notify an international audience of the environmental interconnections in their own regions and intensify the fact that human connection to the rest of nature is required in order to eliminate species discrimination and encourage species liberation from unjustified perspectives of capitalist materialism. It is indeed possible for us to imitate Chihiro and release other “Haku” in the physical reality by extending our consideration to other species, remembering their existence and significance as well as strengthening our connection to them.

If Barry Commoner (1971) is right in saying that everything is connected to everything else, then we need to liberate the rest of nature from capitalist materialism if we want to be free from its inequality, as their confinement will eventually rebound on us. As a result, it will constrain us as much as it does them. However, this does not mean that we are masters and have absolute power to manage them. Rather, we

are indebted to the rest of nature for what we become. As Karen Barad argues, “Individuals’ are infinitely indebted to all others, where indebtedness is not about a debt that follows or results from a transaction, but rather, a debt that is the condition of possibility of giving/receiving” (2012, 159). Chihiro and Kohaku remember their connection and help each other escape from the influence of Yubaba. We, as the audience, can also follow their steps by first looking around us, remembering and observing what we have been having and experiencing, and then fastening our loose connection to them. This way may help secure our sustainable futures from excessive exploitation of capitalism.

*Spirited Away* is a wonderfully composed piece of art with startling images and stunning designs that stir the audience’s minds, regardless of age or profession. It aims to reflect Japanese life in the twenty-first century. The film is full of life choices to be selected. Miyazaki appealingly conveys the life-struggling feelings to the audience and directs them to touch on the power and meanings of love, hope, and sadness of being apart. *Spirited Away* is also an environment-oriented film that applies the magical features of fantasy in order to highlight the negotiation of relations that should be maintained between the growth of capitalism and the environment. This animated film, therefore, proves that animations are more than entertainment. *Spirited Away* enchants the audience with a two-hour story full of enjoyment and knowledge. More importantly, it is the film that should not be missed if environment is the central focus in mind.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Weeraya Donsomsakulkij** is a PhD candidate in English studies and Anglophone literatures and a junior fellow of Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), the University of Bayreuth. She received her master’s degree in intercultural Anglophone studies from the University of Bayreuth. Her recent publications include “Wenn der Wal antwortet: Ein ‘kultureller’ Dialog zwischen den Arten in Zakes Mdas *Der Walrufer*,” *Just Politics*, March 2014, and “An Experience of Sacred Space in Zakes Mda’s *The Whale Caller* (2005): Imagining Cross-species Sacred Space and Trans-species Ritual between Humans and Whales in South Africa” *BIGSASworks!*, February 2016. Her current research interests include environmental humanities and posthumanism. She is currently completing a study of South African environmentalisms represented in selected postapartheid South African literatures.

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