

# Spirited Away

*Spirited Away* sets its intimations of mortality, the decline of a culture and the loss of nature against one of the most sumptuous and dazzling *mises en scène* ever created in cinema – in the bathhouse of the gods, where the initially timorous young heroine goes to find work in order to rescue her parents who have been cursed by a magic spell. This is an enchanting and exciting coming-of-age story that can be enjoyed by all ages, but the subdued, lambent melancholy of the movie's final third, with its train ride into the shadows, is a tour de force of what animation can do.

**Susan Napier, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23**

*Spirited Away*, a Japanese animated fantasy about a little girl's adventures in a realm of gods and monsters, invites comparisons to the Alice books, *The Wizard of Oz* and even *Harry Potter*. First and foremost, though, this remarkable film is embedded in the personal universe of its auteur-director Hayao Miyazaki, whose standing in Japan is comparable to Steven Spielberg's or, indeed, J.K. Rowling's in the west. From its opening in 2001, *Spirited Away* has become the biggest Japanese release in history. It is also the most successful 'foreign' film ever made, with the bulk of its revenue earned in its native country. The film shared the Golden Bear at the 2002 Berlin festival, followed by an Oscar for best animated feature. It is released in Britain both dubbed and subtitled, the dub produced by Disney and directed by Kirk Wise, who co-directed *Beauty and the Beast* and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*.

It's the baggage *Spirited Away* carries as a Miyazaki film that may bewilder British audiences. The director's previous film, the medieval fantasy *Princess Mononoke* (1997), is available on UK video, but to steal a phrase often applied to Woody Allen, both it and *Spirited Away* depart from Miyazaki's early, funny pictures. Not that *Spirited Away* is humourless – it has some splendid gags – but it's deeply recursive, uniting themes and images from across the director's past work. To take the most obvious example, the soot-sprites that toil in the boiler room of the spider-man Kamaji here appear in a different role in Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), while many other elements form part of what might be called Miyazaki-land: his fascination with flight, ecology, elaborate buildings, strong girls, weary gods, overbuilt machinery, empowering labour, even the pigs heroine Chihiro's gluttonous parents turn into. *Spirited Away* is not a sequel or spin-off, yet it's part of a one-man brand some western critics gloss as that exoticising standby, inscrutable orientalism.

Then again, the film's opening demonstrates the cross-cultural universality of fairy tales. A family wanders, or is lured, into a magic place where the parents eat tempting food and turn into pigs. Miyazaki cites Japanese folk tales as his influence here, but one could equally invoke *Hansel and Gretel* or Circe in Homer's *Odyssey* (a work referenced by Miyazaki in the past). The first minutes slide from normality to unease to menace as Chihiro's unwitting parents poke round what they think is a theme-park recreation of old Japan. The crescendo climaxes as the sun sets, the lanterns glow, and Chihiro finds her parents grotesquely transformed. She's not just scared, she's revolted, grossed-out; her body wriggles with nausea before she breaks and runs.

The scene evokes the darker moments of classic Disney but with more edge than Walt's balletically styled terrors. Then with barely a pause the mood switches as the heroic boy Haku takes charge, pulling the hapless girl on a dizzy dash to a bathhouse patronised by gods and spirits (where most of the film is set). The delicacy of the score by Joe Hisaishi (a regular musician for director Takeshi Kitano) gives way to bolder strokes *à la* John Williams, announcing a transition to high adventure.

From here on the audience is at Chihiro's eye-level, to sink or swim in a fantasy world somewhere between Wonderland and Harry Potter's Hogwarts, less soap-bubble surreal than the first, more quirkily digressive than the second. Here a spider-man works beside walking frogs and soot-balls with eyes, but there are also boilers, elevators, even an amphibious train. The bathhouse is furnished in lavish mosaic detail, from the painted partitions to the patterns on the cushions. No doubt this reflects the director's expressed desire to do justice to Japan's design heritage – the bathhouse blends architecture from various periods – but then Miyazaki has always been a craftsman of imagined space, creating eminently explorable, 'solid' drawn worlds that owe little to *Spirited Away's* fairly sparse CG effects. Miyazaki's world-building has been compared to that of some video-game adventures, which also depend on first-person exploration, but analogies are legion, from the baroque-gothic labyrinths of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* to the play-worlds of Rupert the Bear.

Initially Chihiro stumbles through her world, hurtling down steep stairs and being magically yanked across hallways. Her switch to active protagonist is signalled in the second half, when she hitches up her worker's uniform, runs along a treacherous metal pipe that nearly drops her to her doom, then climbs the bathhouse to the top. What causes this change? Miyazaki's answer is hard work, but of a different order from the jovial capitalism of Disney's dwarves. One of the director's most popular earlier films, *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), was about a teen witch making flying deliveries while coping with adolescence. *Spirited Away* has a similarly offbeat work regime with Chihiro tending Japanese gods and learning responsibility and purpose. This has less to do with stereotypes of the industrious Japanese than with Miyazaki's own leftist leanings and belief in empowerment through labour. What makes it more than dreary moralism are the witty riffs on the theme. Chihiro's first trial is to help a soot-sprite carry unnaturally heavy lumps of coal; she succeeds, only for all its co-workers to drop their burdens before her *en masse*.

Western audiences may chafe at the sub-Disney frame rate (much of the animation is done on 'threes', or eight distinct frames a second) and the cartoon acting can't match that of the best US studios. That said, Chihiro's fearful, clinging behaviour is well observed, while her character design – with a thin gawky body and pipe-cleaner legs – is inspired. In any case, cartoon acting was never the sine qua non of Miyazaki's films, which are built instead on heightened situations and sublime fantasy landscapes. Even if CG cartoons come to dominate Japan as they do much of the world, there's a corner of the animation field that will be forever Miyazaki.

**Andrew Osmond, *Sight & Sound*, September 2003**

**SPIRITED AWAY (SEN TO CHIIRO NO KAMIKAKUSHI)**

*Director:* Hayao Miyazaki  
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*Presented by:* Tokuma Shoten, Studio Ghibli, Nippon Television Network Corporation, Dentsu, Buena Vista Home Entertainment (Japan), TFC – Tohokushinsha Film Corporation, Mitsubishi Corporation  
*Chief Executive Producer:* Yasuyoshi Tokuma  
*Executive Producers:* Takeyoshi Matsushita, Seiichiro Ujiie, Yutaka Narita, Koji Hoshino, Banjiro Uemura, Hironori Aihara  
*Producer:* Toshio Suzuki  
*Associate Producers:* Seiji Okuda, Ryoichi Fukuyama  
*Production Manager:* Mozomu Takahashi  
*Casting Co-ordination:* Pug Point,Motohiro Hatanaka, Keiko Yagi, Naomi Yasu  
*Written by:* Hayao Miyazaki  
*Colour Design:* Michiyo Yasuda  
*Digital Camera/Composite Operators:* Junji Yabuta, Wataru Takahashi, Atsushi Tamura  
*Director of Digital Imaging:* Atsushi Okui  
*Supervising Animators:* Masashi Ando, Kitaro Kosaka, Megumi Kagawa  
*Key Animation:* Takeshi Inamura, Kenichi Yamada, Masaru Matsuse, Hideaki Yoshio, Eiji Yamamori, Katsutoshi Nakamura, Kazuyoshi Onoda, Makiko Suzuki, Mariko Matsuo, Atsushi Tamura, Hiromasa Yonebayashi, Kaori Fujii, Tamami Yamada, Makiko Futaki, Yoshiyuki Momose, Akihiko Yamashita, Nobuyuki Takeuchi, Shōgo Furuya, Misuzu Kurata, Atsushi Yamagata, Shigeru Kimishima, Kiroomi Yamakawa, Nobuhiro Osugi, Yuichi Tanaka, Shizue Kaneko, Hideki Hamasu, Hisaki Furukawa, Kenichi Konishi, Masaru Oshiro, Shinya Ohira, Shinji Hashimoto, Hisashi Nakayama, Noboru Takano, Masako Shinohara, Kuniyuki Ishii, Shojuro Yamauchi  
*Telecom Animation Film:* Atsuko Tanaka  
*Supporting Animation Studios:* Anime Torotoro, Oh Production, Studio Cockpit, Studio Takuranke, Group Donguri, Nakamura Production, Gainax, Doga Kobo, Studio Kuma, Production I-G, Studio Musashi, Boomerang, Studio Deen, Studio Hibari, Radical Party, Kiryu, Mugenkan, AIC, Shaft, Liberty Ship, Mad House  
*Director of Digital Animation:* Mitsunori Kataama  
*Digital Animators:* Yoichi Senzui, Masaru Karube, Miki Sato, Hiroki Yamada, Yuji Tone  
*CG Engineer:* Masafumi Inoue  
*Animation Check:* Hitomi Tateno, Mariko Suzuki, Masaya Saito, Minoru Ohashi

*Backgrounds:* Kazuo Oga, Sayaka Hirahara, Yoshikazu Fukutome, Naoya Tanaka, Naomi Kasugai, Ryoko Ina, Masako Osada, Tomoe Ishihara, Kikuyo Yano, Keiko Itogawa, Osamu Masuyama, Hisae Saito, Masanori Kikuchi, Kyokko Naganawa, Hiroaki Sasaki, Studio Fuga, Nizo Yamamoto, Kazuo Nagai, Ogura Kobo, Hiromasa Ogura  
*Editor:* Takeshi Seyama  
*Art Director:* Yoji Takeshige  
*Art Director (Associate):* Noboru Yoshida  
*Titles:* Kaoru Mano, Malin Post  
*Music:* Joe Hisaishi  
*Music Performance:* New Japan Philharmonic Orchestra  
*Conductor & Piano Solos:* Joe Hisaishi  
*Music Producer:* Masayoshi Okawa  
*Music Production Management:* Wonder City Corporation, Masaki Sekijima, Soichiro Ito  
*Sound & Music Production:* Studio Ghibli, Kazumi Inaki, Tamaki Kojo  
*Orchestra Mixing:* Shinichi Tanaka  
*Surround Mixing:* Suminobu Hamada  
*Audio Director:* Kazuhiro Hayashi  
*Recording/Sound Mixing:* Shuji Inoue  
*Recording/Mixing:* Tokyo T.V. Center, Tsukuru Takagi, Takeshi Imaizumi, Tetsuya Satake  
*Optical Recording:* Futoshi Ueda  
*Digital Optical Recording:* Noboru Nishio  
*Sound Effects:* Michihiro Ito, Toru Noguchi  
*Sound Effects Support:* Eiko Morikawa, Ayako Ueda, Mayuka Miyazawa, Kazuaki Narita, Toshiaki Abe, Mausu Promotion

**Voice Cast**

Rumi Hiiragi (*Chihiro*)  
Miyu Irino (*Haku*)  
Mari Natsuki (*Yubaba/Zeniba*)  
Takashi Naito (*Akio, Chihiro’s father*)  
Yasuko Sawaguchi (*Yugo, Chihiro’s mother*)  
Tatsuya Gashuin (*frog man*)  
Yumi Tamai (*Lin*)  
Yo Oizumi (*foreman of the frog men*)  
Koba Hayashi (*River God*)  
Tsunehiko Kamijo (*school principal*)  
Takehiko Ono (*employee*)  
Bunta Sugawara (*Kamaji*)

Japan 2001©  
124 mins

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