



*On Monsters and Spirit Bathhouses:
An Analysis of the Portrayal of Change
using Magical Realism in My Neighbour
Totoro and Spirited Away*

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On Monsters and Spirit Bathhouses: An Analysis of the Portrayal of Liminality and Trauma Using Magical Realism in *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbour Totoro*

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Abstract

Studio Ghibli is a critically acclaimed Japanese film company, known for its use of magic realism. Beneath the cheerful animated exteriors, Ghibli films actually serve to examine the themes of change, loss, and growth, through the innovative lens of magical realism. This technique utilises fantastical elements set within a realistic modern world in order to subtly tease out nuances between our lived experiences and imagined ones.

Altogether, the characteristic of setting these two Miyazaki films with realistic elements of Asian culture while encountering fantastic creatures/events, faithfully reflects the experience of change, which simultaneously can result in loss and prompt growth. In this way the films serve to highlight the coming of age experience in an ever-changing Japanese society. This paper examines Studio Ghibli's mastery of the technique of magic realism by specifically analysing *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbour Totoro*, in order to evaluate how the illustration of the Asian narrative, through employing this technique, successfully portrays themes of change in a manner that is thought-provoking and insightful, and can actually make more comprehensive such ordeals that some youths have to endure, resulting in an empathy that otherwise might not be developed.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our teacher-mentor, Mrs Nicola Perry, for her invaluable insights and her constant guidance and support throughout the process of our paper.

Introduction

Studio Ghibli is known for its animated movies of masterful artistry and fantastic worlds of magic. Although there is a stereotype of animated films only appealing to a juvenile audience, the studio has produced content palatable for mature audiences, revolving around themes of environment, war, and tragedy. Each of the films has elements of magical realism, delving into worlds afflicted by witches, monsters and other mythical creatures (Dua, 2019).

It is well-established by scholars that “magical realism combines realism and the fantastic... magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed” and, through its use of both real and mystical elements, the genre fragments the world in a blatantly postmodern sense (Zamora & Faris, 1995). Refusing to legitimise a distinction between the marvellous and the real, magical realism has previously been recognised more for its political (postcolonial and feminist) agenda and its post-structuralist qualities than its role in representations of violence and trauma (Langdon, 2011).

This paper introduces magical realism as an artistic technique, and examines the theme of trauma in two Asian films. This paper goes on to illustrate how magical realism can be used to portray trauma in a more lighthearted but no less serious light, specifically focusing on how this ability to blend the two is what makes the Studio Ghibli films so affecting.

Literature Review

Background of magical realism

Magical realism was first introduced as a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. It was referred to as a way of reacting to reality and pictorially representing the mysteries inherent in it. Magic realism embodies the 'calm admiration' of the magic of discovery that things already have their own meaning. It represents in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world (Roh, 1995).

An important distinction must be made between magical realism and fantasy. Magical realism exists as a subset of the broader genre of fantasy. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction (Zamora & Farris, 1995). Furthermore, the intrusion of the magical in realistic settings “serves to socialize the young adult reader by portraying an alternative — and perhaps subversive — view of society” (Latham, 2006).

Magical realism is also a genre associated with transgressiveness and destabilising dominant narratives. Postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement, by combining the

supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic effects, therefore, are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath (Slemon, 1995). Hence, magical realism is often used by non-English artists as a genre to comment on society in resistance to traditional colonial art forms.

In East Asian literature, magical realism has been used to represent certain aspects of culture and presentation of mythical cultural narratives. Writers from East Asia utilise differing magical realist styles to portray social dislocation wrought by profound economic changes, to recover traditional cultural values, to reinterpret local history and to depict environmental degradation, among other things (Holgate, 2020).

Presentation of trauma through magical realism in Ghibli films

“Fantasy can have a more powerful impact, in writing for children, than does naturalism” (Rustin and Rustin, 2012)

Studio Ghibli is best known for their animated feature films, typically featuring the experiences of young children in a distinctly Japanese landscape. Despite Miyazaki’s films having a “made for children” image, he does not shy away from dealing with deeper issues of grief and loss. Drawing inspiration from his own childhood, during which he experienced a temporary ‘loss’ of his mother due to her struggle with tuberculosis, themes of grief and loss run through multiple Ghibli films, most notably *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Spirited Away*.

Within these themes, there are several distinctive traits that characterise these Ghibli films – first, storytelling through the eyes of children, exploring the young and innocent perspective and responding to incidents far beyond their understanding. The films chart the maturation of the children as they learn to deal with traumatic events that occur, chiefly displaying their growing independence.

Astoundingly, Studio Ghibli has been able to seamlessly reconcile the childlike exterior and dark interior of their films through the utilisation of magical realism techniques. In her book *Miyazakiworld*, Napier notes that what makes *My Neighbour Totoro* (and Ghibli films as a whole) so remarkable and affecting is Miyazaki’s ability to resolve traumatic issues of loss and grief through the lens of fantasy, allowing viewers to deal with such difficult emotions “through a filter of enchantment that overlays the darkness with a sense of the possibility of joy and transcendence”.

My Neighbour Totoro

My Neighbour Totoro follows the story of two young sisters, ten year old Satsuki and four year old Mei, who move into an old house with their father to be closer to the hospital, where their mother is recovering from a long-term illness. Throughout the film, the two

sisters meet many magical creatures and find themselves in fantastical situations, charting their response to the traumatic experiences they encounter.

The titular character, Totoro, is a magical creature who can only be seen by children, and helps them through difficult situations they encounter in the film. As a nod to traditional Japanese culture, the character is inspired by kami, animistic spirits from Japanese folklore. Totoro offers guidance and solace to the sisters, accompanying them as they navigate their growing independence in various situations, from their father leaving them stranded at the bus stop to Mei getting lost in the wilderness alone.

Notably, Miyazaki's decision to utilise a magical resolution, in the form of the comfort and reassurance provided by the magical Totoro, to real-life trauma underlines one of the film's key messages: that belief in the powers of nature and the imagination will give us the strength to go beyond ourselves and transcend the trauma of daily life (Napier, 2018).

Spirited Away

Written 13 years after *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Spirited Away* tells the story of 10 year old Chihiro, who enters the world of Kami, spirits of Japanese Shinto folklore, while en route to her new home. After her parents are turned into pigs, Chihiro has to learn to cope with this loss, on top of constantly trying to find a way to free herself and her parents from the spirit realm and return to their regular, human lives.

Spirited Away develops the theme of learning independence to deal with traumatic experiences — Chihiro's parents' transformation and desertion of her in a foreign land is genuinely traumatic and terrifying to any 10 year old child, as she is not only physically but psychologically separated from her parents. This is rather explicitly alluded to in her initial reactions and demeanour upon first being cast alone into the spirit world - she is portrayed as frightened, unsure, and nervous. The weighty burden of saving her entire family falls on her shoulders, and she slowly becomes more confident in dealing with dangerous situations in the mystical world of Yubaba's bathhouse. Through her interactions with the fantastical creatures she meets, Chihiro's maturation is observable in her transition from a timid, meek child who relied on other figures for support, to an independent, courageous girl who confronts Yubaba, the head of the bathhouse.

Another notable event is the introduction of No Face, a magical monstrosity who begins terrorizing the visitors and residents of the bathhouse. As the person who let No Face into the bathhouse, Chihiro learns to take responsibility for her actions - she gains the confidence to directly confront the rampaging spirit as he causes chaos in the bathhouse, and she does so alone. By offering No Face part of the magical dumpling she had hoped to feed her parents in order to transform them back into humans, Chihiro's accountability and ability to make sacrifices is evident. As Napier notes, the film's real excitement lies in Chihiro's growing maturity in confronting No Face's increasingly bizarre, fantastical actions,

which are used as a tool to highlight Chihiro's moral and emotional evolution in the face of constant flux and uncertainty.

Analysis of Films

We will be analysing our films based on a few common themes, *Loss*, *Reaction to Trauma*, and *Character Growth* which are mainly alluded to through the use of magical realism. These themes are also similar to many essential Asian animations' central concerns, and have similar ways of portraying these concerns. Loss can be caused by catastrophic events such as traumatic childhood experiences. The characters go through a transformation of the self ignited by external, often terrifying experiences, highlighting the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world (Balaev, 2008). These films also serve as a medium of integration between the individual and a common traumatic experience into collective memory allowing for some form of concrete representation for the event.

Loss

In *Spirited Away*, loss is mainly centred around the loss of innocence and childhood and a transition into adulthood and the working world.



Figure 1: Chihiro losing her name
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)

In *Spirited Away*, the loss of names is a motif symbolising the loss of one's identity, particularly in the transition to working adulthood. Chihiro's name is magically being erased by Yubaba, the owner of the bathhouse and the antagonist of the movie, after Chihiro signs a contract to work in order to save her parents (Figure 1), much like many of the characters who have forgotten their own names due to their names being taken away by Yubaba. This signifies the loss of her original identity and the assumption of a new identity as a reified, working unit in the bathhouse. Hence, this serves as a commentary on the working culture of Japan where one is often so caught up in the pressures of the working world in a capitalistic society that one loses their sense of identity and is defined by the existence of one's work.



Figure 2: Haku transforms from a dragon back into a human
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)

Another example is Haku, who has forgotten his name due to it being taken away long ago and he has been fully swallowed by the realm of magic. He has the ability to transform into a dragon and sometimes loses control of his powers. But when Chihiro reminds him of his name, he immediately transforms back into a human as his scales are dramatically shed (Figure 2), illustrating his reclamation of part of the original identity he had lost since working for Yubaba. This implies that one's identity is a variable concept that can go through different stages of definitions according to the changes in experiences that shape it,



Figure 3: Mei and soot sprites
Source: Studio Ghibli (1988)

In *Totoro*, the idea of loss is centred around loss of life, and the concept of death. Death is alluded to by symbols such as the soot sprites (Figure 3) that greet us animatedly at the start of the film when the two sisters Mei and Satsuki explore their new home. Despite seeming harmless, these adorable “*Susuwatari*” are creatures that are actually known to be seen before death in Japanese folklore.



Figure 4: Totoro grows a tree for the Mei and Satsuki
Source: Studio Ghibli (1988)

Later on, the main figure of the plot, Totoro, is introduced to viewers as a lovable rabbit-like character which four year old Mei stumbles upon having wandered off on her own to explore in the woods, tumbling down a gap in a camphor tree and into its secret lair. Although his rotund shape and fur evoke the warmth of a cartoon bear, his sheer size and languid movements convey an element of intimidation. More unsettlingly, questions of who can actually see Totoro and when, are stressed throughout the film. Pointedly, Satsuki does not at first, and the girls’ father is never able to. In one of the scenes where the girls marvel

at a tree which magically springs up from the seeds that Totoro gave them, an objective lens reveals an empty backyard from their father's perspective, revealing how he is unable to see Totoro nor the girls' interactions with it (Figure 4). The reality of Totoro is hence stressed to be subjective, and is possibly only visible to the deceased or those who are nearing death.



Figure 5: Satsuki encountering soot sprites in the forest
Source: Studio Ghibli (1988)

This can be evidenced from the girls' trip to the hospital to visit their mother is postponed due to treatments, Mei runs away crying and ends up disappearing. Other villagers go in search of her only to find her slipper in the river, alluding to the possibility of her death from drowning. Satsuki then goes to look for her, and opens death's door, crossing the border between the dead and the living. Furthermore, the appearance of the Susuwatari soot sprites which represent death (Figure 5), also signifies Satsuki's impending transition into the afterlife. Upon crossing over to the other side, Totoro makes an appearance to help Satsuki find her sister in the land of the afterlife, and then they later go visit their mother. Strangely, nobody notices they are there except for their mother, who is dying and says "I felt Satsuki and Mei just laughed near the tree". This suggests that Satsuki herself dies on the hunt for her missing sister and is hence able to see Totoro, the key symbol of death and the afterlife in the film.

In addition, the notion of death is also alluded to in the appearance of the cat bus which Totoro calls upon to help Satsuki look for Mei when she goes missing. The cat-bus initially seems like a majestic vehicle designed with the purpose of transporting its passengers directly to the realm of fantasy. However, upon closer look, one of its bus stops is labelled "Path to the Grave", or "Grave Road" (Figure 5), highlighting the possibility that the bus is actually a transport device for a one-way trip to the afterlife.



Figure 6 : 墓道 'Bo-do' : Grave road
Source: Studio Ghibli (1988)

The possibility that Mei and Satsuki indeed entered the afterlife is compounded by how the two girls do not have shadows in the final scene, just like spirits from the afterlife. Altogether, this rounds up an unsettling underlying narrative of impending death which is subliminally communicated through symbolic magical and traditional Japanese elements.

Coming-of-age/Character growth

In *Spirited Away*, the protagonist, Chihiro, experiences immense character growth after encountering the spirit world, where she learns to take responsibility as a member of a family and the greater community.



Figure 7a: Chihiro refusing to enter the tunnel to the theme park
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)



*Figure 7b: Chihiro being dragged by force by Yubaba
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)*

Chihiro's reluctance to explore the abandoned theme park disguising the spiritual realm symbolises her general aversion to exposing herself to any form of foreign experience, preferring to stay within her comfort zone, relying on others to make decisions for her (Figure 7a). Her hesitation and uncertainty are further emphasised when Yubaba literally uses magical force to drag forward to meet her (Figure 7b). This altogether conveys her feelings of confusion and fear when faced with so many drastic changes to her life overnight.



*Figure 8: Chihiro gives “No-face” the medicine ball meant for her parents
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)*

Thus, she is often passive and has to rely on other characters like Kamaji, Haku, and Lin for help. This is characteristic of the culture of seniority and reliance on community in traditional Asian contexts. However, at the end of the film, Chihiro asserts the importance of independent action when she takes responsibility for “No-Face” (Figure 8) and sacrifices the medicine she wanted to save for her parents, in order to cure No-Face and lead him out of the bathhouse. This caring accountability regarding No-Face highlights her maturation.



*Figure 9: Train bound for Swamp Bottom
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)*



Figure 10: Chihiro sitting with spirits
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)

Furthermore, the shift in the nature of her responses to magic reflects her increasing independence. The evidence of this change is strikingly reflected in a scene taking place nearing the final act of the film, where Chihiro boards a train travelling on water, alighting at the Sixth Station at Swamp Bottom to seek help from Yubaba's sister, Zeniba, in aiding her injured friend Haku (Figure 9).

The train journey is deliberately surrounded by mystery and an otherworldly feeling - the train travels seamlessly on water, and all the other passengers appear to be silent shadows with human forms (Figure 10). Chihiro's demeanour here is strikingly different from her initial fear in the face of uncertainty that characterised her at the beginning of the film - her expression conveys a sense of silent determination of the actions which she intends to take to aid her friend. A similar attitude of confidence symbolically represented in her responses to magic is shown later on when she has reached Swamp Bottom, when she allows a magical, moving lamp to guide her to Zeniba. She is unfazed and willing to accept the aid of bizarre spirits. Altogether, the evident shift in the calmness of her responses amidst the alien magical environment strikingly depicts her growth in character.



Figure 11: Chihiro inviting "No-face" along
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)



Figure 12: Chihiro talking to "No-face"
Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)



Figure 13: Chihiro carrying Bo, Yubaba's grandson who turned into a mouse, on her shoulder

Source: Studio Ghibli (2004)

Beyond the magical environment alone, her treatment of others, such as No-Face, a magical spirit whom she is initially afraid of, further highlights character growth. Initially, she was averse to entering the magical realm and was practically coerced into entering it due to the recklessness of her parents. Now, she invites No-Face to board the train with her, giving him direct instructions to 'sit down' and 'behave [himself]' (Figures 11 and 12). Later on, she offers her smaller friends to 'ride on [her] shoulder' on the long walk to Zeniba's house, literally illustrating her ability to shoulder responsibilities for others (Figure 13). By taking on the role as initiator, as opposed to one being reluctantly dragged along for the ride, it shows her maturity in her ability to guide others and contribute to the larger community by being responsible. Altogether, the train journey reinforces Chihiro's character growth in confidence and maturation.

Reaction to trauma of losing parents/siblings

As already mentioned, *My Neighbour Totoro* opens with Satsuki, Mei, and their father moving into their new house, where they encounter tiny creatures called susuwatari, or soot spirits (Figure 3). These spirits are Satsuki and Mei's first encounter with the magical realm in the film, and their cute, innocent depiction belies a more serious commentary. The spirits serve as visual symbols of the sisters' unease in their new environment, darting to and fro just as how unsettling thoughts appear and swiftly disappear from the mind.

As the film progresses, events that occur are seen entirely through the children's eyes, not only portraying their perceptions, but also their responses. Satsuki and Mei's actions directly parallel traditional and standard methods of therapy, employed in the treatment of mental illnesses such as anxiety. Their actions include providing a sense of safety, teaching coping skills, and inspiring active rather than passive behaviour in response to trauma.



Figure 14: Mei playing on Totoro's body
Source: Studio Ghibli (1998)

In the scene where Mei first encounters Totoro, she treats this magical occurrence without hesitation and happily befriends this unknown mammoth creature. The scene is created to highlight the potentially traumatic nature of the situation — with his gaping mouth and large teeth, it could easily be interpreted as an intention to hurt Mei (Figure 14) ; however, Mei's actions can be seen as proactive behaviour in response to this. Rather than aversion and avoidance, she assesses positive potential in the situation, actively reaching out and pursuing a connection.

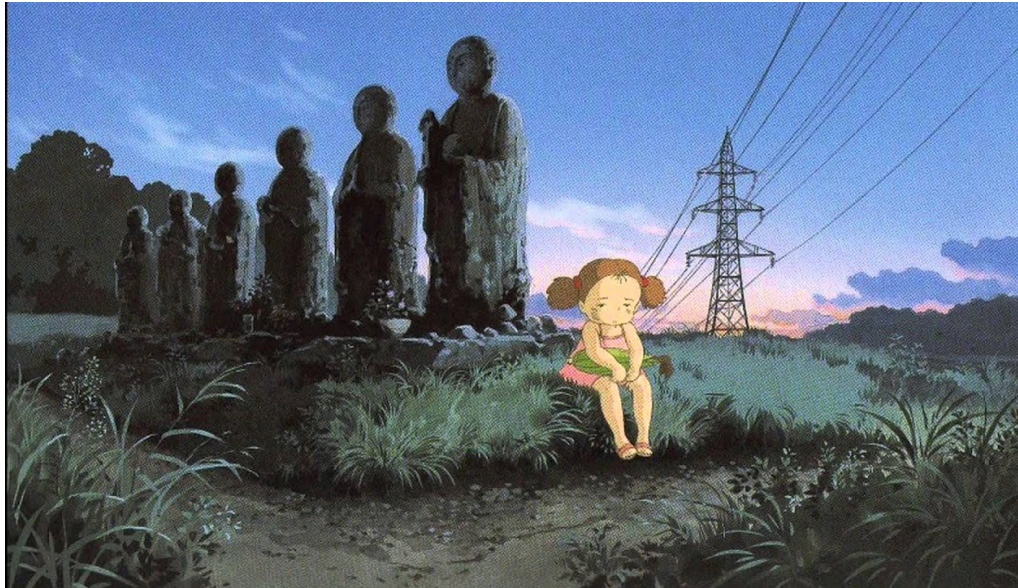


Figure 15: Mei sitting dejectedly next to Jizo statues
Source: Studio Ghibli (1998)

The film also hints at the solace provided by the spiritual realm in helping children cope with trauma. Though there is no explicit mention of religion, characters tend to seek comfort from the spiritual in moments of helplessness. Towards the end of the movie, Mei leaves home alone to deliver an ear of corn to her mother but ends up getting lost. Satsuki panics when she realises her sister is missing and frantically searches for her, rejecting help from the adults around her to eventually rely on the magical. As she calls on Totoro to help her, she passes by a shinto shrine, a traditional Japanese place of worship to the Shinto gods for good fortune - this alignment of events symbolically equates the character of Totoro with spiritual release and comfort. When they eventually find Mei, she is next to a group of Jizo statues (Figure 15), traditional Japanese deities for the guardianship of children - symbolising protection even when alone. This scene thus displays a two-fold response to the trauma of losing her sister — the rejection of adult support in favour of independence and self-reliance, and having confidence inspired by the spiritual figures to comfort her in times of difficulty.

Conclusion

Overall, through the usage of fantastical elements, Studio Ghibli portrays the serious themes of loss, trauma and growth in a palatable manner to appeal to the general Asian audience. The use of magical realism helps to incorporate elements of unique Japanese cultures of folklore and mythology, as a homage to their heritage. Furthermore, when coupled with the realistic, everyday characters which reflect contemporary concerns of Japanese living, the sense of verisimilitude that the characters offer is emphasised. This confluence of the fantasy and the real-world hence allows viewers to reflect on these themes of change on a more personal level, truthfully representing the voice of the era.

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