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How Japanese Film Exemplifies Traditional Japan in the Presence of Western Influences

In many Japanese films, there exists a thematic dichotomy revolving around the constant battle between established Japanese culture and western influences. Three films stand out in shedding light on this topic, each in their own way: Miyazaki Hayao’s *Spirited Away* (2001), Ozu Yasujiro’s *Late Spring* (1949), and Shinkai Makoto’s *Kimi no Na wa* (2016).

In *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki Hayao addresses the cultural pollution in Japanese society. *Spirited Away* is heavily influenced by Shinto beliefs, as its setting is in the spirit world, where the main character Chihiro was spirited away into. In the beginning of the movie, we can see that Chihiro’s family is quite obviously a product of western consumerism, as they own a German-manufactured car, as well as sport western clothing. Once Chihiro is transported to the spirit world, however, she begins her journey to a more traditional lifestyle and worldview. Chihiro, in the presence of Shinto-inspired spirits, no longer wears her overly large T-shirt and shorts and sneakers but is equipped with a traditional *jinbei-*like work robe with a tasuki cord. Additionally, in comparison with the modern and westernized architecture, the spirit world’s architecture is uniquely Japanese, with sliding paper doors (*sh­ōji*) in the Japanese-style bathhouse. Miyazaki believed that Japan must stay pure in its traditions and ways, and not be a blind victim to westernization. Because of this stance, he associated objects with foreign characteristics with evil, though not the kind that westerners usually define evil as. Instead, this evil, Boyd and Nishimura state in their article “Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki’s Anime Film ‘Spirited Away,’” is a “Shinto ethical outlook” that characterizes the events in a person’s life as either “reducing (polluting) or promoting (purifying) one’s ability to participate fully in the life energy that permeates all of Great Nature” (9). For example, Chihiro’s parents, who represent Japanese people who participate in the westernization agenda in Japan, are shown to be greedy, and are even actually turned into pigs in the film, which Miyazaki explicitly states are a symbol of greed. Additionally, the film was released after the Japanese economic bubble burst, so Miyazaki made sure to show his audience that, like Chihiro’s parents, a number of people are still in the pig-like consumer society mindset, without realizing it.

Miyazaki Hayao, arguably the most famous Japanese anime director, co-founded Studio Ghibli, a powerhouse in the anime industry. Miyazaki started his career at Toei Animation in 1963, working as an in-between artist. After co-founding Studio Ghibli, he directed many famous and influential movies, such as *Castle in the Sky* (1986) and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). *Spirited Away* (2001) became the highest grossing film in Japan, frequently regarded as the greatest film in the 21st century.

In an interview during the US premier of *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki said that he has “a very warm appreciation for the various, very humble rural Shinto rituals that continue to this day throughout rural Japan.” This deep appreciation and acknowledgement of the Shinto religion present in Japan is likely the source of the rationality of his recurring themes of environmentalism and Shintoism. Miyazaki’s *Mononoke-hime* (1997) for example, also takes inspiration from Shinto and Buddhist ideals and mythology, mixed into having an environmentalist theme: human’s greedy destruction of nature is evil. Another important theme of Miyazaki is feminism, as can be seen by the vast amount of his films involving female protagonists, without the need of “a savior,” as stated in an interview in 2013. Throughout his career, Miyazaki won a total of 120 awards, while having 177 nominations. His awards include Best Animated Feature in the 75th Academy Awards for his film *Spirited Away* and Best Film in the 1998 Mainichi Film Award for *Princess Mononoke*.

The next film that deals with the juxtaposition of western influences in a traditional Japanese setting is *Late Spring*, directed by Ozu Yasujiro. *Late Spring* was released during the US occupation in Japan, so films were subject to the Occupation Government’s censorship. This included the censorship of any evidence of destruction made by the US during the war, such as the firebombing in Tokyo, which killed more than 100,000 people on March 9, 1945. During this period of occupation, there was an abundance of western influence and products being advertised, as can be seen in the film. For example, in the film, there is a Coca Cola sign at the beach, as well as road signs, all of which are in English. Historically, there is an influx of western influence penetrating Japan, so as a result, many of the elements in the mise-en-scene of the movie are western.

In the film, there are noticeable instances where post-war Japan is experiencing new mindsets, including the idea of the modern girl and remarrying. Aya, Noriko’s friend, initiated her divorce, a nod to the 1948 new divorce laws, which were set a year before the release of the film. This occurs in the context of the traditional setting of Noriko’s family’s lifestyle. While Noriko’s home uses tatami mats and other traditionally Japanese furniture and architecture, Aya, a “modern girl,” lives in a western-style home with western-style chairs and wears foreign clothes and eats nontraditional foods and rejects Japanese thoughts and mindsets. Aya initiated her divorce, while Noriko is forced to enter into an arranged marriage. Additionally, there are other examples of the juxtaposition of west versus east, including the scenes involving the children playing baseball and the traditional Noh play, as well as the traditional Kyoto structures and architecture compared with the modern buildings in the city.

Though he was initially considered to be overly influenced by American cinema, Ozu Yasujiro is considered by many to be one of the most “Japanese” directors. When Ozu was a teenager, he saw the film *Civilization*, which sparked his interest in becoming a film director. His film *Tokyo Story* is regarded to be the third greatest film of all time in the 2012 *Sight & Sound* poll, voted by critics. In the same poll, it was chosen to be the greatest film of all time, voted by a pool consisting of 358 directors including Woody Allen and Quentin Tarantino. Other widely acclaimed films include *Late Spring* (1949) and *Floating Weeds* (1959). Ozu’s style was very distinctive, as he directed his films to capture everyday life and the themes of marriage and family in a simplistic manner, without the use of complicated camera work, but rather with a static camera presenting calmness. Ozu invented the “tatami shot” – the use of low angles, with the intention to make the viewer feel as if they are sitting on a tatami mat. Additionally, he is famous for his “frame within a frame” effect and the pillow shot.

The last film to be featured is Shinkai Makoto’s 2016 anime film *Kimi no Na wa*. Though the story is a romance between two high schoolers whose bodies switch several times in the film, we are allowed to compare rural and traditional Japan with urban and westernized Tokyo. Unlike Ozu and Miyazaki, Shinkai merely exposes us to the difference in cultures, and does not wish to persuade us in believing that there is a problem or issue with westernization.

Mitsuha lives in a lazy rural town, reminiscent of pre-war and nonurbanized Japan, and is also comparable with the slow pacing of the town in *Late* Spring. Shintoism, though dying due to a lack of interest and shift in focus to politics, is still practiced in the town, particularly led by Mitsuha’s family. Mitsuha’s grandmother, a longtime practitioner of Shintoism, mentions the Shinto idea of Musubi, the power of becoming and creation, and associates with the red cord that ties the two protagonists together, through time and distance and a difference in culture. Through the swapping of their bodies, both Mitsuha and Taki experience the vast differences in each of their cultures. Taki is used to the fast-paced *seikatsu*, or livelihood, of the most populous prefecture of Japan, which Mitsuha longs for. When they switch livelihoods, Shinkai makes it comedically obvious that both Mitsuha and Taki are not accustomed to the fast-paced Tokyo life and the tranquil and lazy life of rural Japan, respectively, and through this comedy, the diametric opposites are clear.

Shinkai Makoto, occasionally called “The New Hayao Miyazaki” in reviews and imdb.com, drew inspiration from Hayao Miyazaki and his works, including *Castle in the Sky*. Unlike Miyazaki and Ozu, Shinkai does not have deeper themes that are related to Japanese society or identity. Instead, an article on MyAnimeList writes that Shinkai’s films are often stories of the “unavoidable barriers between individuals,” either through means of distance, and/or time, or metaphorically (kaanton). Makoto’s style is usually very visually appealing, and is characteristic in how saturated the colors are, as well as mimicking the nature of cameras, such as the element of lens flares. In the meteor shower scene in *Kimi no Na wa*, for example, the night sky is vibrant with hues of orange, purple, blue, and green.

Shinkai, born in 1973, is a relatively young director, yet directed many highly successful films already, including *5 Centimeters Per Second* (2007), *Children Who Chase Lost Voices* (2011), *The Garden of Words* (2013), *Your Name* (2016), and *Weathering with You* (2019). He has won Best Director in many award festivals, such as the Tokyo Anime Award Festivals in 2017 and 2020 for his films *Kimi no Na wa* and *Weathering with You*.

Through these three great films, we can see different points of views and motives in the westernization of Japan and the difference between modern and traditional Japan. Each film also showcases the contrasting directive styles of Yasujiro Ozu, Miyazaki Hayao, and Shinkai Makoto. Each director has their own stance and level of importance on the issue of the cultural pollution in Japan. Through these films, we can learn about how the initial westernization was forced upon by the occupying US government, how westernization allowed greed to pollute Japan’s ”purity,” and finally how contemporary views can be more indifferent to foreign influences on Japanese society.

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