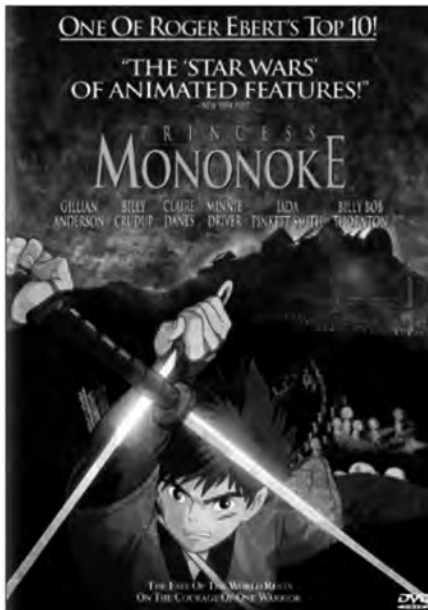


The Films of Hayao Miyazaki *Shinto, Nature, and the Environment*

By Charles Newell

The films of Hayao Miyazaki are some of the most popular in Japan and the rest of the world. Perhaps his most famous work, *Spirited Away*, is the highest-grossing domestic film in Japanese history.¹ It also won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2003. Over the past two decades, the Walt Disney Company has reissued English-language versions of Miyazaki's films with the voice talents of such famous actors as Patrick Stewart, Claire Danes, and Billy Bob Thornton. Often, these films can be familiar to Western audiences because Miyazaki bases many of his scripts on European sources. Two recent films from his production company, Studio Ghibli, are good examples. *The Secret World of Arrietty* (2010) is based on the classic children's book by English author Mary Norton, *The Borrowers*; and *Ponyo* (2008) is loosely based on the Hans Christian Andersen story "The Little Mermaid." However, two of his most popular films, *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001), are perhaps his most "Japanese" films. Despite this, they have become very popular with American audiences and can be great introductions to Japan's unique and complex culture.



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a "foreign movie" or say that anime is too childish are quickly put under Miyazaki's spell. His engaging narratives draw students into a deeper understanding of abstract concepts.

Princess Mononoke is set in a mythical, medieval past and *Spirited Away* in the modern present. Though the settings are somewhat disparate, the themes in both movies are quite similar. Miyazaki uses these movies to explore Shinto, its idea of purity, humanity's relationship with the spirit world, and modern Japan's environmental concerns. Viewers of these films cannot help but be captivated by their adventurous, complex plots and beautiful, hand-drawn animation; but to truly appreciate them, the viewer needs to be familiar with the culture behind them.

Despite the international success of Miyazaki's films, one cannot get away from the "Japanese-ness" of his creations. Such is the case with *Princess Mononoke*. Like many Japanese films, it has a medieval setting: a

time of samurai and monks. However, it is also set in a mythical time, one without a particular historical context. The events of the movie take place during a time when humans and gods lived together. It is a time of traditional village life but also the beginning of an industrial revolution, where an iron forge and primitive muskets are key plot elements. In this time—that is no time at all—Miyazaki can explore themes that are very important to the Japanese.

Explaining the concept of Shinto to a high school class can be very daunting. It is a religion that is literally and figuratively foreign to the American teenager. A teacher can certainly find readings and handouts that outline the religion's main tenets, along with pictures of shrines and torii gates. However, a board full of notes and a dry, scholarly handout can often induce yawns and eye rolls, especially when you are teaching an Asian studies elective. This is where Miyazaki comes into play. Even students who claim they do not want to watch

time of samurai and monks. However, it is also set in a mythical time, one without a particular historical context. The events of the movie take place during a time when humans and gods lived together. It is a time of traditional village life but also the beginning of an industrial revolution, where an iron forge and primitive muskets are key plot elements. In this time—that is no time at all—Miyazaki can explore themes that are very important to the Japanese.

In his book *Lost Japan*, expat American Alex Kerr discusses many issues with modern Japan. He fell in love with the country and moved there in the 1960s, but now, he sees traditional Japanese architecture and the country's natural beauty being replaced and destroyed. He writes about the once-pristine countryside: "Roads were few, and the mountains were heavily blanketed with old-growth forests. Mist boiled up out of the valleys as if by magic; the slender and delicate tree branches quivered like feathers in the wind, and in the gaps between them the sheer rock surface would show through, only to be hidden again."² This description could have been taken directly from *Princess Mononoke*. Miyazaki informs his audience that Japan was once a verdant paradise that has been eroded away by the incursion of humanity. Thus, the character who despoils the natural world in the film is not a modern developer but the owner of a fortified iron forge in the midst of a primeval mountain forest. Lady Eboshi, one of the film's antagonists, does not have to fight environmentalists as she clear-cuts a forest for its iron ore, but must struggle against the ancient gods of the forests represented by giant talking wolves, boar, and apes.

Kerr once again captures the ethos of the film perfectly in his book. He tells us that "nature, in Japan, used to be far more mysterious and fantastic, a sacred area that surely seemed inhabited by the gods. In Shinto, there is a tradition of *Kami no Yo*, the "Age of the Gods," where man was pure and the gods dwelled in the hills and trees."³ Miyazaki captures this mythic time perfectly. Greed and selfishness have severed man's ties to nature, and instead of trying to live in harmony with it, many of the humans in the film want to conquer and destroy it. This is best-symbolized by the character Jigo, a greedy monk who wants to collect a mountain of gold from the emperor for beheading the forest spirit, a giant deer-like creature with a human face, because it is said that possessing the spirit's head will bring immortal life.

The film also explores the theme of purity in Shinto, or harmony with the gods. Anything impure (sin) separates us from the gods. The sin in this film is pollution caused by man in the once-pure natural world. The film's opening scene depicts a demon attacking a village, which is actually a giant boar god who was polluted with an iron bullet from Lady Eboshi's Iron Town. The boar was fighting to protect the forest, and the wound he received turned him into a creature of pure hate. The hatred inside of him and the pollution of the iron bullet are one and the same. Hatred causes impurity, and impurity causes hatred. Sin manifests itself as a demon attacking the human world, just as the humans attacked the boar and its realm. Miyazaki illustrates a basic tenet of Shinto by depicting a vicious cycle of violence and revenge.

But the film's message transcends uncompromising environmentalism. Yes, pointless destruction of the natural world is derided, but *Princess Mononoke* does not simply vilify the people who destroy the forest, as an American children's movie might. The title character, Princess Mononoke, is a human child raised by a giant wolf god. Mononoke detests Lady Eboshi and seeks to murder her and destroy the iron forge she uses. And yes, Eboshi wants to strip the forest from the mountainsides for her own profit and power, but at the same time, she is a compassionate woman who rescues lepers and prostitutes to give them a place to live and work within her Iron Town. Eboshi does want to kill Mononoke and all the giant god animals, but she is also struggling against the opportunistic local warlord who

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wants to take over her operation and enslave her workers. Industrialization is not necessarily evil. As the owner of a factory, Lady Eboshi is not just a character bent on greed and destruction. Her actions toward humans are very kind; her approach to nature is just misguided.

The pivotal character in this complex drama is an outsider named Prince Ashitaka. His arm was wounded and cursed by the angry boar-demon, and he has journeyed to the ancient forest around Iron Town to seek out the Forest Spirit and a cure. He meets Lady Eboshi and comes to respect her work with the people she rescues from disease and poverty, but he detests her treatment of the forest and its creatures. Ashitaka also meets and falls in love with the beautiful but untamed Mononoke. He wants to help her save the forest, but he also wants her to forget her blind hatred of Lady Eboshi. He tries to convince her that killing the ruler of Iron Town will only beget more hatred and violence. Ashitaka attempts to insert himself into the conflict and show the two factions that they need to compromise. Industry can exist, but it must produce responsibly. Humans need to realize that they are part of the natural world, and though the ideal world of ancient gods living in the forest will never return, a balance can be struck. Is this the path that modern Japan, and the rest of the industrialized world, must follow?



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As for *Spirited Away*, its more modern setting maybe be more familiar to an American audience, but a few minutes into the movie, the subject matter becomes much more Japanese and esoteric than *Princess Mononoke*. It is rather amazing that this very Japan-centric film won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature. Yes, the animation is beautiful and many themes in the movie are universal, but the whole plot of the movie revolves around a spiritual understanding of the world that is unique to Japan and Shinto. The story begins with Chihiro,

a naïve and somewhat bratty girl, pouting because she is moving far away from home, friends, and familiar surroundings. Anyone can see that she is due a lesson in maturity. But how she gets this lesson is at first very foreign to American audiences.

Chihiro's parents take a wrong turn when looking for their new house and pass into a mysterious forest that features torii gates and stone spirit houses. If one is familiar with Japanese culture, one would know that the family is nearing contact with the spirit world. Their way is eventually blocked by a spirit statue in front of a gate. Chihiro's father, ignoring all the spiritual signs, assumes it is the entrance to an abandoned amusement park. However, once they walk through the red barrier, the family passes into the spirit world. The greedy and shallow parents, who represent modern Japanese people disconnected from their traditions, find an open but unattended restaurant. They ravenously eat the food they find there, which turns them into pigs. Seeking help, Chihiro goes further into the spirit world by discovering another very Japanese thing: a bathhouse. Here, spirits come to be cleansed and return to a pure state. Once there, a young boy

named Haku befriends Chihiro and convinces her to work at the bathhouse until she finds a way to rescue her parents. Like *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away* makes the viewer confront some main concepts of Shinto: the existence of the spirit world and the concept of purity.

We see in the bathhouse a core concept of Shinto. Everything in the natural world has a spirit—frogs, birds, even radishes—and they all come here to be cleansed. Miyazaki also discusses his concern for the environment again. At one point, the bathhouse is tormented by a “stink spirit.” Chihiro is forced to serve this customer, but she discovers her inner bravery and cleanses it. The foul creature turns out to be a river spirit that has been corrupted by pollution. Chihiro pulls out mounds of garbage from the spirit, and it flies away happy, clean, and pure. Once again, man has corrupted nature, turning a supernatural creature into a type of demon. In fact, Chihiro is originally rejected by the spirit workers in the bathhouse because she “stinks.” Her human smell is offensive to these beings; the pure world of spirits is in open conflict with the human world—a source of corruption.

Chihiro does mature through her ordeal. She finds a way to free her parents by passing a test set up by the evil witch who runs the bathhouse. Chihiro also helps to rescue Haku from his enslavement at the bathhouse. He is a boy who can turn into a dragon. However, he does not remember his name, which prevents him from returning home. Chihiro and her bravery once again intercede. She remembers being saved by Haku as a child when she fell into a river. He was the river spirit, but Chihiro informs him that the river has now been filled in and paved over, another reason Haku could never return home. This again shows man's capacity to harm nature and destroy the Japan that once was.

Chihiro's role is similar to Prince Ashitaka's in *Princess Mononoke*. She becomes a bridge between the spirit world and the human world. Her parents represent the unchecked greed and spiritual vacuum of modern Japan, but she has compassion for the natural world through her close relationship with Haku. Miyazaki emphasizes again that a balance between the human world and the natural world must be found for the benefit of both.

Most students may not be budding religious scholars, but some may be Hayao Miyazaki fans. And those who have not seen his movies are likely to become fans of his beautiful animation, complex stories, and focus on young people as protagonists. These films can be great tools for introducing students to Japanese culture and religion that perhaps will inspire them to become more inquisitive about other facets of Asian cultures. They may even lead a class into discussions about how humans should relate to the natural world. ■

NOTES

1. “Hayao Miyazaki,” *The Numbers*, last modified June 16, 2013, <http://www.the-numbers.com/person/100370401-Hayao-Miyazaki>.
2. Alex Kerr, *Lost Japan* (Melbourne: Lonely Planet, 1996), 17.
3. *Ibid.*, 18.

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