

30 Years of Ghibli: Spirited Away

written by edward j rathke | March 26, 2015



2015 is the 30th anniversary of the founding of Studio Ghibli and, [according to Hayao Miyazaki, it may also be one of its final years as a studio](#). Because this is one of my favorite films studios and Miyazaki is one of my favorite artists, who's made some of my favorite films, I've decided to go through the history of Studio Ghibli one film at a time.

If you're looking for the discussions of the previous weeks:

- [Laputa: Castle in the Sky](#)
- [Grave of the Fireflies](#)
- [My Neighbor Totoro](#)
- [Kiki's Delivery Service](#)
- [Only Yesterday](#)
- [Porco Rosso](#)
- [Pom Poko](#)
- [Whisper of the Heart](#)
- [Princess Mononoke](#)
- [My Neighbors the Yamadas](#)

This does, however, mean I won't be discussing *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, which was made before the founding of the studio.

I'll also only be discussing the Japanese audio version of the films, though that doesn't mean the dubs are bad or not worth seeing. They're just slightly different. I'll also be discussing these with the assumption that they've been seen by you. So, yes, spoilers are below.

Spirited Away is what brought Hayao Miyazaki fame in the US. Sure, he was known and loved before, but I'd argue that was largely by anime enthusiasts. Winning an Oscar grabbed him a lot of well deserved attention, and I think it makes sense that this film brought him so much well deserved recognition.

I think the peak of Miyazaki's career happened here. *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*, and *Howl's Moving Castle* are, in my opinion, his best films. They're where he really soars as a filmmaker. Everything from art to music to direction to story—these three films give us Miyazaki at his best, when he's unparalleled by any other animator.

Really, no one does what Miyazaki does and no one even tries. Some Pixar films sometimes reach for the same kind of effect but I don't think anyone ever hits on that awe and wonder, that beauty and evocative imagery better than Miyazaki. *Spirited Away* does everything he's ever wanted to do with a film about and for children and it does it elegantly and perfectly.

I think it's significant, too, that Miyazaki is at his best while Takahata seems to be at his worst. Takahata was Miyazaki's mentor and former partner, and the films Miyazaki was making during this time period certainly

outclassed what Takahata brought to the table. I mean, compare these three films to *My Neighbors the Yamadas* and *Pom Poko*. As stated last week, I was no fan of the *Yamadas* but even *Pom Poko* is decent at best. It feels like Takahata's heart wasn't in them, especially when compared with the way *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Only Yesterday* were so different and so powerful. So we have two halfhearted or mediocre films from Takahata while Miyazaki is putting out the best work of his life. I still don't think he's made anything to top these three, but, I mean, he doesn't have to. These carry his greatness around the world and into the future.

Watching *Spirited Away* this time reminded me of *My Neighbor Totoro* because they're similar, in certain ways. At their core, they're about young girls who discover a magical world inside the larger world they've known. There's no direct or explicit conflict for them to overcome, just a journey of understanding and growth they must go through.

Miyazaki has made two kinds of films so far. *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away* gives us the real world as it is, but also reveal another secret world full of magic and kami. *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Princess Mononoke* gives us the world we know but imbued with gods and magic and fantastic elements. *Porco Rosso* stands sort of on its own but is more similar to the latter than the former. Though *Princess Mononoke* is my favorite, I think Miyazaki might be at his best when he's creating magic within secret worlds that only children seem to discover.

☒ He captures something fundamental about growing up. Something no other filmmaker has really done as well. He gives us that loneliness, that fear, that open-eyed acceptance of the unimaginable, the way we walk into a world that is always foreign and only slowly making sense, where magic feels possible, where Death feels far away, and our parents—even when we think we hate them—tether us to reality and give us a sense of safety we'll never truly appreciate.

Chihiro, or Sen, is a brilliant example of this. She's clearly unhappy with her parents and her current predicament in life. Being forced to leave her friends and move to a new city. She feels cutoff and her parents are the perpetrators of this devastation. In her frustration with her parents, she literally wanders past some unknown barrier and finds herself in a new world with new rules—more on those later—and everything is frightening and terrible and the only thing that could make her feel safe or save her from the strangeness of it all have been turned into pigs.

In this new world, no one wants her and many want to eat her. No one cares about her safety or happiness except for Haku.

It's interesting to note how willing Kamajii and Lin are to help her when it appears she's in danger. Kamajii initially has no time for her until Lin tries to give her up to Yubaba, and then Lin goes out of her way to make her feel at home when several of her coworkers wants to eat her.

Even so, their kindness is only that. They don't wish her to come to a gruesome end and they're fine with sharing enjoyment with her, but there's no

sense that they love her in the way she needs, in the way any child needs.

Chihiro grows up a lot in the bathhouse. When she first enters, she's impetuous and ruffled and almost helpless, but she proves herself again and again until she wins over even those who wished her ill. She follows all the rules of the world, even when it'd be better to break them.

Which brings me to an interesting element in the film. These rules. Yubaba mentions them a few times. She's forced to hire Chihiro because she specifically asks for a job. It's a rule! She has to give work to anyone who asks, even if she doesn't want to. These rules come up a few times, most notably again at the end of the film when Chihiro returns to the bathhouse to reclaim her parents.

✘ You get the feeling that Yubaba is as helpless as the rest of them. She feels like the antagonist at times, but is she? More than being actively evil or anything like that, she feels like a performance. She has to be this entity, just as a river god must be the god of a river, just as a human must be an outcast in the world of magic creatures and things.

Even Zeniba, Yubaba's sister, seems to imply this. Zeniba is a kind and gentle witch who appears to be trying to be a force of good, and she describes Yubaba as her opposite, and owes this to them being twin sorceresses. as if this is fated. As if there's no choice but to perform these opposite acts.

There are very specific rules that govern this magical world. They're never explained or even overtly discussed, but it becomes clear that everyone has a task to perform, or a performance to maintain. Like, what binds Kamajii to the boiler room? What binds the soot to him? There are rules beneath the surface of the world that govern it.

Oddly, within those rules, the inhabitants of the bathhouse look for every loophole. It's a place of greed and excess, or unkindness and manipulation, of petty authority.

And Chihiro follows the rules while she's there, but she remembers who she is. She has to, or she'll become consumed and lost in this other place. She's be trapped liked Haku, performing as Yubaba's apprentice because he has forgotten all else.

Though Chihiro must remember who she is or she'll be consumed, it's in trying to recapture the life she had that holds her back. It's only in breaking free from her past, embracing the role of Sen, and changing into someone new that allows her to break free of the roles and rules imposed by this world.

This is, ultimately, the whole of the film here. The film is about rules and boundaries, about what life and humans dictate and how that weighs on other humans, how it begins to shape them. Haku loses himself to the rules forced upon him and becomes something other to who he was before. Chihiro, on the other hand, finds a continuity by remembering her past and changing with the world. She holds onto the Chihiro she was before, but she must also live as

Sen. As Sen, she's only a bathhouse worker, and her performance is superb. By gaining confidence in her new role while remembering where she came from, she's able to forge a new identity.

It's in changing that she's able to navigate through and push back against expectations and demands of the world around her.

All things have a role in life but we must try to define it, rather than let it define us.

Even NoFace has a role, odd as it is.

NoFace is actually one of my favorite characters in Miyazaki's work. I don't really know what it is about NoFace that I love so much, but I think she exemplifies these rules and their imposition best. Hers is a performance, but a very odd one. Rather than performing a specific and consistent role, she becomes a sort of cipher to people's desires. She is what we want her to be. She becomes what we make her. Avaricious, gluttonous, spilling money to make others perform for her, which, in turn, only solidifies the performance forced upon her.

She becomes sick and insane within the Bathhouse because the rules are so solid and powerful there, but also because she meets Chihiro, who wants nothing from her, who wants her to be nothing specific. It drives her crazy until she's given medicine and allowed to escape the bathhouse, where she returns to her natural state. A simple NoFace who only follows Chihiro on her short quest to save the life of Haku.

✘ Another interesting aspect to the entire film is that Chihiro is really the only character who makes choices. She saves the bathhouse from NoFace and saves a river god from whatever disease has turned him into a stink god. She saves Haku's life and even manages to free him from Yubaba's sorcery.

Chihiro is not a damsel in distress, though that's how it first appears. When she meets Haku, he saves and protects her from the world so full of danger that she's wandered into. He appears to have all the power and all the knowledge and she's at his mercy, in a sense. She cannot save herself and must wait until he solves her problem.

Day after day, Chihiro grows and proves herself the agent of her own life. When everyone expects her to fail—the audience included—she succeeds. When we expect Haku to save her, she must save him. She even has to save her own parents from the curse put on them.

She's an unlikely heroine, mostly because she doesn't even seem to realize that she's being heroic. She's guided by a childlike innocence, curiosity, and wonder. She's kind and gentle and trying to do the best she can. She's trying to follow the rules as well as possible in the hopes that a way out will appear.

Guided by her own sense of morality, she saves herself, Haku, and her parents.

She's not saving them from an evil force. No really. Yubaba isn't really on her side, but she's not actively against her either. All Yubaba can do is weigh the odds against Chihiro, which she tries in her last gamble at the gates of the bathhouse.

The oddness of *Spirited Away*, like *My Neighbor Totoro*, is that, from the outside, her journey doesn't matter. Not only that, but there's no indication that it's happened at all. Her parents return to normal as if no time has passed. However long she spent in the bathhouse is something that happened only to her, and though she's a very different girl than the one who stumbled in there, none of that is outwardly accessible or even noticeable.

But isn't that the way growing up is? The only obvious signs are physical, but the real changes happen within us, while no one's paying attention. We don't transition from child to adolescent and from adolescent to adult based on some physical manifestation of change. It's not in growing hair in new places or growing taller or developing new shapes that define us as an adult or child. It's something deeper and more personal. Something that happens internally.

Chihiro has fallen in love, saved lives, and become a legend in a world that humans don't even know exists, and so all this change, all this development becomes an internal one, a deeply personal one.

The environmental concerns are here too, though they're only briefly mentioned. Part of what causes Haku to lose himself is that he was the god of a river that became filled in and developed into apartment complex. His past literally became erased by humanity and the rules of capitalism that govern us. The other river god, the one who appears as a stink god at the bathhouse has clearly been polluted by humans. Chihiro and the other attendants pull broken bicycles and all kinds of trash from him before he is clean and restored to his power.

Though brief, these illustrate in a clear and powerful way how humans are destroying our own world, and how it spills into the world of gods and magic.

Yes, Miyazaki is at his best here. There's a lot more I could say about this film, but others have said more and they've said it better. Most reading this have probably seen this and loved it. Some could probably even recite most of the words, because that's what it is watching films when you're a kid, yeah? You put it on repeat until it's deep inside you. So deep that it becomes a part of you.

Many probably began their journey with Ghibli here, and this is a great place to start. It is, without a doubt, one of his best films. One of the best animated films ever made.

It's not my favorite, and it probably never will be, but it's the kind of film I love returning to. It's the kind of film I'm excited to show my children. It's sweet and beautiful, and it shows that life's problems are solved through kindness, generosity, understanding, and courage. She comes through by resisting the greed and debauchery of the other bathhouse

inhabitants, by staying true to who she was, and by finding the strength to become who she wants to be.

Compare this to something like *Narnia* where waging war is often the solution to the world's problems.

I'll stick with *Spirited Away*, thank you. I'll stick with peace and kindness. With understanding.

Next week we have *The Cat Returns*.

