



Logic and Narrative in *Spirited Away*

At a rare press conference given by director Hayao Miyazaki for his animated film *Spirited Away* in 2001, a journalist remarked on the 'freedom of the author' in the film – 'a feeling that you [Miyazaki] can take... the story anywhere you wish, independent of logic, even.'

Spirited Away does indeed evoke a sensation that its story is not beholden to logic. From set-up to conclusion, the audience is introduced to a dazzling array of characters and events; to a world filled with spectacle, the fantastic and the bizarre. Amidst this multitude of offerings, the way events unfold feels, at times, almost random. Yet the film

is far from lacking structure. The story sets up a situation that it does, eventually, resolve. Each element we are introduced to, if baffling, nonetheless seems to belong to a unified whole. Events feel as though they are motivated, if not by a clear logic, then by *something*.

This article will consider what that *something* may be. It will examine why *Spirited Away* appears to lack 'logic' and what, aside from 'logic', gives it structure. It will consider how these features serve a thematic purpose in the story. It will also briefly examine how studying context (for instance, the film's relationship with Japanese culture) can provide

further ways to approach the idea of logic.

The premise of *Spirited Away*

Spirited Away tells the story of Chihiro, a ten year-old who finds herself trapped in a spirit world after her parents take a wrong turn when moving to a new town. Chihiro's parents are transformed into pigs after they unwittingly eat food intended for the gods. Chihiro, left alone in the spirit world, must get a job to survive. Helped by a mysterious young man called Haku, she gets work at a bathhouse for the gods, presided over

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by Yubaba, a fearsome, entrepreneurial witch. Chihiro signs over her real name to Yubaba to get work, becoming 'Sen'.

Cause and Effect: Logical connections between events

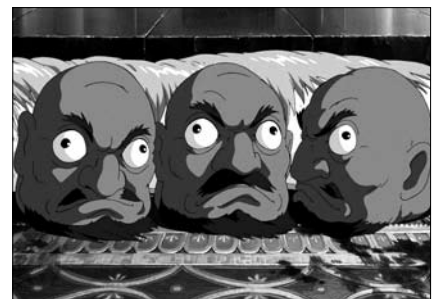
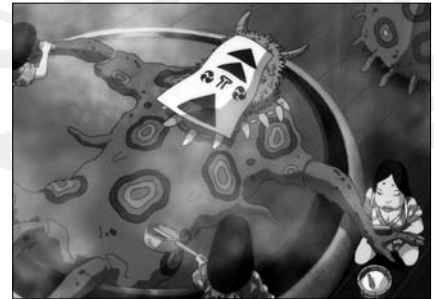
What is logic in film? If, as the journalist above

says, freedom from logic allows the story to go 'anywhere', where might it go if logic were present? The suggestion is that, rather than go 'anywhere', it would follow a path in which each moment was a logical result of other moments – in which events were visibly, logically, connected. We might refer to the presence of logical connections between events as *causality*, or cause and effect.

The very act of calling something 'narrative' suggests connections between its elements. We are not presented with a random collection of characters, settings and events – 'narrative' suggests that these elements are linked, that there is a relationship between them making them into a story. The relationship of cause and effect – the idea that one event causes another,

which causes another and so on – is commonly identified as a defining feature of cinematic narrative. Bordwell and Thompson, for example, define narrative as 'a chain of events in a cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space',² while Stephen Katz states that:

In the course of any story this cause and effect relationship is the underlying scheme that involves the reader. It does



*this by asking the reader to become involved in making the logical connections between events.*³

In *Spirited Away* causal relationships between events are often unclear. Chihiro's encounter with a 'stink god' (really a polluted river god) is an example. When she successfully cleans the god, it gives her a small herbal cake. It is initially unclear to both Chihiro and the audience

what the cake is for. But later it turns out to be exactly what is needed to help heal Haku and to quell 'No-Face'. It is not indicated before these vital moments that the cake will have these powers – yet, when the time comes, Chihiro guesses what to do. To an audience, causality is unclear. Why has this gift, resulting from a 'chance encounter', assumed such significance and power? Why is it just the thing required in two important

– but different – situations? A lack of obvious cause and effect at many points may be the primary reason for the film's apparent lack of logic. Importantly, though, causality is not entirely absent. In the opening scenes in particular, clear causality connects events. Driving to a new town *results in* the family losing their way *which leads to* them finding the 'theme park' (really the spirits' abode) and so on.

Character traits are set up to explain the family's behaviour, providing further motivation for what happens. It is once Chihiro is inside the spirit world that causality subsides. This is telling. It suggests that the use of cause and effect in *Spirited Away* is linked to the portrayal of the spirit and everyday worlds as different from each other. Once in the spirit world, we are asked to trust *its* laws,

rather than those of 'logic' and causality. At times, specific rules are explained to Chihiro – for example, that if she holds her breath while approaching the bathhouse the gods won't be able to see her. But these rules feel somewhat random, or else part of an invisible bigger picture. Although they are a type of 'logic', they still do not seem like typical cinematic logic or causality.

The reason for this relates to another feature of 'classical' narrative⁴ – the active role of the protagonist. According to Bordwell and Thompson, narrative in 'classical' cinema depends on the assumption that 'the action will spring primarily from individual characters as causal agents'.⁵ This type of narrative not only creates a world of causality but places main characters at its centre.

In *Spirited Away*, the protagonist Chihiro/Sen and her experiences are the main focus of the story and she does cause some things to happen. Yet many events we see in the spirit world seem primarily unrelated to her, as though they would still happen even if she were not there. Chihiro (and the audience) witness 'effects', but causes are often hidden from view. This is not a world Chihiro is at the centre of but one she finds herself nonetheless forced to adapt to.

Although in one respect the lack of obvious causes for many events appears to render the narrative and its logic obscure, in another it serves a clear function. The audience is placed in a similar position to Chihiro – in a baffling new place with

laws they do not understand.

Further connections between events: Time and Space

Where causal connections are unclear, we might ask what other connections can be made. If not 'logic', what gives the film structure? What leads us from moment to moment? As suggested by Bordwell and Thompson, narrative events, as well as being causally connected, take place in 'space and time'.⁶ In *Spirited Away*, while causal or logical connections between events are at times indistinct, clear relationships in space and time are maintained. Indeed, there is perhaps unusual emphasis on establishing these relationships.

Nightfall and daybreak on each day are carefully noted – conveying a clear idea of the story's timeframe (four days, three nights). This is important: the bathhouse operates by night and sleeps by day and the type of action possible at these times changes accordingly. Space also influences what action can take place. The bathhouse is laid out according to an 'upstairs-downstairs' hierarchy. There are its lower levels, containing the bathhouse machinery and its operators, where Chihiro first gains entry; there are its mid-levels, where customers and employees interact; and there are its upper levels, containing Yubaba's rooms, the centre of power.

Cinematic narrative often places emphasis on each

moment serving and advancing the plot, with 'in-between' moments removed. For example, travel from one location to another is often left out. If moments of travel do not present new narrative information they may be considered unnecessary, as audiences can make the assumption that travel has happened if they see a character in one place, then another. *Spirited Away*, conversely, seems to emphasize such moments. The space is mapped out in painstaking detail through the many moments Chihiro spends running along corridors, up and down staircases, across bridges and so on to get to where she needs to go. These moments *do* serve the narrative, however; while they do not always contain information that 'advances the plot' directly, they have a cumulative effect and a number of important functions.

In part, they are of vital importance for the very reason that causality is not always clear. The narrative is able to flow because Chihiro moves from space to space and because time keeps passing – these things naturally suggest a progression of events, even when one does not cause another.

Equally importantly, they allow the audience to get to know the story world. We see not just individual spaces but how they are connected. A rich, three-dimensional vision is created. In the process, a sense of what Chihiro is up against emerges. For instance, facing Yubaba to ask for work is not just difficult in

itself – Chihiro must first gain access to her by finding her way past the bathhouse's various challenges.

The film also uses repeated interactions between Chihiro and the space to present character development. By showing her traversing the same spaces multiple times it allows us to see her changing response, in particular a growth in her courage and resourcefulness. An example is the precarious staircase Chihiro at first descends with terror to enter the bathhouse: at a later point we see her negotiate this without a second thought.

In presenting a solid vision of time and space that transcends its causality, *Spirited Away* further supports the sensation that Chihiro has stumbled upon a world that extends beyond her immediate experience of it and would exist if she were not there. Things here take place in a defined space and according to their own timeline – regardless of Chihiro – and it is up to her to adapt and respond as best she can.

Themes/ Intent

Hayao Miyazaki has suggested that character development was a central concern from the outset when creating *Spirited Away*.⁷ Regarding the film's themes, he has stated:

This story is not a showdown between right and wrong. It is a story in which the heroine will be thrown into a place where the good and bad dwell together, and there,

she will experience the world. ... She sees herself through the crisis, avoids danger and gets herself back to the ordinary world somehow. She manages not because she has destroyed the 'evil' but because she has acquired the ability to survive ...

The main theme of this film is to describe, in the form of the fantasy, some of the things in this world which have become vague, and the indistinct world which tends towards erosion and ruin.⁸

The 'things which have become vague' that Miyazaki wishes to inform his audience about seem varied. He touches upon both declining knowledge among Japanese children of aspects of traditional Japanese culture (including traditional design and Shinto religion), and a perceived shift in the culture of childhood itself, towards the pursuit of immediate pleasures and away from social responsibilities.⁹

These concerns provide reasons for the narrative to function in the way that it does. They further explain what connects and motivates events. The series of 'challenges' Chihiro faces in the spirit world, if not obviously causally connected, are nonetheless connected and motivated by the underlying goal of testing Chihiro and allowing her character to develop. The growth she undergoes through working and helping others is particularly important.¹⁰ The arbitrary or mysterious nature of certain things that happen – the appearance of effects without causes – also has a function. Chihiro must learn

to survive in a world where things do 'just happen', where characters behave in mysterious and unpredictable ways, where not everything is clear. It perhaps has more to do with the real world than is at first apparent.

Further, the film's detailed portrayal of its environment and many characters, and its concerns with presenting space, seem motivated by the goal of informing its audience about 'fading' aspects of Japanese culture, including the Shinto religion and a tradition of work and duty rather than self-interest. In this light, exposing the audience to a unique (and lost?) world is as much a goal of the narrative as progression towards an end-point.

Logic and Context

If a concern with Japanese traditions is central to *Spirited Away*, a further question arises regarding the 'logic' of the story. Might it appear more 'logical' to a Japanese audience?

This is part of a broader question about ways in which prior knowledge or context might influence audiences' understanding of the film. Examining this in depth is beyond the scope of this article – contexts to investigate further could include Japanese culture and art; the impact of the translation to English; or the author's creative processes and other work. Here, the example of Shinto religion will be considered.

Shinto

Traditional Japanese religions, or *Shinto*, have been named as an influence on *Spirited Away* by Miyazaki and others. Shinto is quite difficult to pin down: rather than being a single, centralized and organized religion, it is a 'portmanteau term for widely varying types and aspects of religion' in Japan.¹¹ However, *kami*, or localized spirits, are a recurring central concept. Kami can inhabit any part of nature – all things are believed to possess a 'force' that, when potent enough, allows them to manifest as spirits.

When considering Shinto and *Spirited Away* we can ask two questions about context. One is which elements – for instance, characters and visual motifs – come directly from Shinto and how knowledge of these might change our understanding of the film. For instance, would recognition of the stink god/river god allow us to understand the meaning of the 'herbal cake'? The second is whether the values and concerns of Shinto inform the film at a thematic or structural level.

James W. Boyd and Tetsuya Nishimura's article 'Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film *Spirited Away*'¹² provides a useful overview of how knowledge of Shinto can inform viewing of the film. It reveals that the answer to the first question is quite mixed. While some motifs and characters come directly from Shinto, and could provide clues about the story, a greater number seem to have their origins in Miyazaki's imagination.¹³

Indeed, given Shinto's fragmented and localized nature, not all deities have widely recognized physical representations. What is more important is the fundamental idea that gods or spirits can emerge from any part of nature. This allows Miyazaki much creative license with his character designs – the 'radish god' that Chihiro meets in the bathhouse lift is an example. It also suggests that even an audience with knowledge of Shinto will not immediately recognize every character they see.

In regard to the second question, of themes, Boyd and Nishimura's article contains much that is revealing. Most revealing is the idea of entry into a 'liminal' or 'in-between' state. While anything in nature can harbour *kami*, to actually 'experience the *kami* presence' one has to become sensitized to it. To become sensitized a change must take place – one must 'learn to live with a sound, pure heart/mind'. In order to change, one must go through a transitory, 'neither-here-nor-there' phase. The Japanese title of *Spirited Away*, *Sen to Chihiro no kami-kakushi*, makes direct reference to the idea that people, upon entering this 'in between' state, may disappear, for a time, from ordinary life. (The title translates to something like 'Sen and the Spiriting Away of Chihiro'.¹⁴ *Kami-kakushi* literally means 'hidden by *kami*'.)

With this in mind, *Spirited Away*'s treatment of cause and effect and time and space – its odd sense of 'logic' – makes further sense.

According to Boyd and Nishimura, the 'in-between' realm is characterized by 'disorientation, ambiguity and a sense of otherness'. The characteristics of *Spirited Away's* form that have already been discussed operate in order to create just such a feeling. An understanding of Shinto, then, rather than clarifying the film's logic, instead primarily reinforces the *function* of its 'illogical' nature. As Boyd and Nishimura write, 'For an engaged audience, the film itself, through its own artistry, can effect a sense of disorientation and liminal space.'

Considering Shinto as a context for *Spirited Away* reveals much about the film. It is important to note, however, that while Shinto is a stated influence of Miyazaki's, knowledge of it is not necessarily widespread even amongst his Japanese audience.¹⁵ Indeed, one of Miyazaki's goals, as mentioned, is to expose his audience to this and other 'eroding' aspects of Japanese culture.

Conclusion

The feeling that *Spirited Away's* narrative operates 'independently of logic' comes not from a lack of structure, but rather from

a structure that treats 'cinematic logic' in a particular way. In 'classical' cinematic narrative the feeling that a story is logical comes from cause and effect relationships between events, in which main characters play a central and active role. In *Spirited Away* 'classical' cause and effect is not always present. The protagonist Chihiro is often involved in events for which the cause is hidden and in which her involvement seems accidental. In contrast, connections in time and space between events are emphasized, helping their progress to remain coherent as well as strongly evoking the spirit world in which the story is set.

These features of narrative structure support the themes and intention of *Spirited Away*. Its treatment of cause and effect, time and space help to vividly create a spirit world that is set apart from everyday reality. This world reflects the Shinto concept of an 'in-between' state that people must enter into in order to change. The character development at the film's heart is demonstrated through Chihiro's increasing ability to cope with this baffling world, which is not organized around her. In these ways, *Spirited Away* pays homage to aspects of Japanese culture that Miyazaki feels are 'becoming

vague', including Shinto religion and the rewards of work, duty and helping others.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Unnamed journalist quoted in press conference transcript by Tom Mes, 'Hayao Miyazaki', *Midnight Eye*, 1 July 2002, http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/hayao_miyazaki.shtml.
- ² David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, McGraw-Hill, USA, 1990. p.55.
- ³ Stephen D. Katz, *Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualising from concept to screen*, Michael Wiese Productions, Los Angeles, 1991, p.145.
- ⁴ 'Classical' narrative here refers to the dominant cinematic narrative form that Bordwell and Thompson call the 'classical Hollywood cinema' because of its origins in American studio films. (David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, op. cit., p.70.)
- ⁵ Bordwell and Thompson, op. cit., p.70.
- ⁶ Bordwell and Thompson, op. cit., p.55.
- ⁷ See Mes, op. cit.
- ⁸ Hayao Miyazaki, *The Art of Spirited Away*, Studio Ghibli, 2001, p.13.
- ⁹ Miyazaki, op. cit., p.13-4.
- ¹⁰ The rewards of work and helping others are also explored through the parallel character development of No-Face and Yubaba's baby son.
- ¹¹ Brian Bocking, *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto*, Curzon Press, Surrey, 1995, viii.
- ¹² This article appeared in the *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol 8, No. 2, October 2004.
- ¹³ For example, the stink god/river god when cleaned takes on the dragon form associated with water deities, but beyond this its details are original. Its form as a 'stink god' while polluted is inspired by an incident from Miyazaki's childhood in which he witnessed a polluted river being cleaned. (Miyazaki mentions this in Mes, op. cit.)
- ¹⁴ Other translations of the title include 'Sen and the Mysterious Disappearance of Chihiro' and 'The Spiriting Away of Sen and Chihiro'. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0245429/>
- ¹⁵ See Bocking, loc. cit., for further information.

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