

Tracing the Sprit in Art: Textures of Memory and Japanese Aesthetics in Studio Ghibli's animated film, *Spirited Away*.

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Abstract: Memory is a psycho-social phenomenon in cultural studies, human minds are shaped by their experiences, and the purpose of memory is to transmit these experiences represented by the context, to study the traces of memory in the collective consciousness of the community. Memory finds its assimilation in cultural artefacts, myths, metaphors, symbols and it is often portrayed through circulation of them in multiple forms. Films are one of the very popular medium for studying the hidden world of hermeneutics. Japanese culture is a culture that has its root in mind and mindful meditations, also Buddhism is associated with the dimension's mystical awareness in its literary and cultural practices. Japanese culture has influence of deep aesthetic categorization in everyday life such as ink painting, flower arrangement, calligraphy, haiku and other forms of poetry portraying the aesthetic ideals originating in *yūgen* (the darkness in the region of unknowable profundity), *mono no aware* (the pathos of things), *wabi sabi* (beauty in transition). Japanese culture often portray the philosophical understanding associated with such terminologies. This research article seeks to study the texture; the "experiential quality of the text" and memory embedded in the Academy award winning animation film , *Spirited Away*(2001) by Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki from Studio Ghibli where aesthetics are associated with the idea of beauty , mystery and shadows .

Keywords : Cultural Memory, Japanese Aesthetics, Film Studies, Texture, Film Hermeneutics.

Introduction: Culture is associated with a way of life and with a complex network of life in numerous forms. Art, Literature, technology, symbols, architecture, language, rituals, and norms. There are patterns which must be observed to understand the social practices and material culture , which is associated with transmission and adaptation. Film studies play important role in any culture, they act as a mirror to the society , a popular discourse to

understand the life in cultural space. Early twentieth century is the origin of cultural studies where critics like Mathew Arnold for whom culture is all about "sweetness and light" (Arnold, Mathew) and Raymond Williams whose work is associated with theories in cultural materialism. The field of cultural studies is often credited to the work done at cultural studies centre at the University of Birmingham in the UK, founded in 1964, this institution is pivotal in formalizing

cultural studies as an academic discipline. Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, and others acted as an influential force in tracing the origin of this field of study. Theories associated with culture being an industry, materialistic deception and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin, Walter, 1936) essay where studying art was associated with being authentic and art's aura is the understanding of the true art form. Bell hooks in "a revolution of values: the promise of multicultural change" with respect to cultural studies he quotes, Martin Luther Junior, in the book *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*

"the stability of the large world house which is ours will involve a revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing'-oriented society to a 'person'-oriented society.

When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy" (During, Simon)

"Spiritual bankruptcy" in the world of materialism has become a major concern also, loss of the aesthetic function in the present times has yielded to the phenomenon of mass production. In this sense we understand, the role of memory is significant along with understanding the past which was glorious and

such past attain dignity when the virtuous art depicts it.

Objectives of the paper

Memory evokes a texture, which is aesthetical in its visual and auditorial representation and shares an olfactory, gustatory, semantic nature as well. For understanding memory's conceptualization Erl and Rigney explain that,

"Cultural memory is an ongoing process of remembrance and forgetting in which individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past and hence reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites. As the word suggests, remembering is better seen as an active engagement with the past, as performative rather than reproductive" (Erl and Rigney 2009, 2). Similarly, heritage is also an ongoing process as Smith and many other scholars in heritage studies have demonstrated (Smith 2006); the construction, reconstruction, even destruction of heritage and material culture is part of the transformation, development and therefore overall process of heritage."(Veysel Apaydin,2020)

Hayao Miyazaki's art is often associated with the idea of heritage in cultural context, he is bringing it back through the cultural philosophy, folklore and the traditional prints of Japan, the very essence of Japanese cultural is visible, it the technique of new digital storytelling that brings back what is forgotten in the passage of time. Cultural memory is performative in nature, cultural heritage, ethnic relationships,

transmission and transformation of a cultural space. Rather than being the "prosthetic memories", art must attain the nature of higher aesthetic function rather than associating with the residual culture. Memory and its performance is associated with being "mnemonic reserves" (Roach) which should be associated with the cultural synthesis creating a culture of memory. Art of Hayao Miyazaki act as a mnemonic reserve to understand the nature of culture, how it evolved and transformed. Not only in *Spirited Away* but also *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, which is the interpretation of classical "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter", it is the transformation of art through magical graphics and cultural motifs, it is bringing back the memory in most refined ways. Japanese animation is a medium to understand the psyche of Japanese culture, because the kind of discourse which is created is associated with the culture. In present dynamics the art in Japan has acquired postmodern nature but here we understand the idea of memory and how the past is associated with creating the classics of animation film with Hayao Miyazaki *Spirited Away*. Japan is a global power it is known for its imitation of the artistic pursuits, as we trace the history of this civilization, the world of Japanese thought was in light with the world.

The memory of art is a particular example of creative memory. Here, an entire cluster of texts turns out to be potentially active. The actualization of this or that text is subject to the complex laws of general cultural movements and cannot be reduced to the formula "the newest is best." The sinusoidal represents the simplest

form of shift between cultural "forgetting" and "remembering." (Lotman, Juri, 134-135)

Art of Studio Ghibli is associated memory that is creative to the core. They present creativity in the highest and most gentle standards also to understand texture, we understand it is the "experiential quality of the text" (Stockwell, Peter, 1). Japanese art is known for its meditative qualities, the influence of Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Buddhism has made this culture, evoke the significance of unity in diversity in Japanese aesthetics in general. The aesthetics are reflected in almost every part of their culture, while we read the text we understand the idea of Japanese art in general. Animation in Japan has a long history. One of the most popular academy award winning films *Spirited Away*, It evokes the memory, a folk idea of culture merges with the present postmodern culture which is associated with pastiche and parody, this text is similar in its presentation and it necessarily evokes the narrative unconscious of the culture going off-rail. Studio Ghibli Animation act as a digital landscape to understand the idea of art in Japan and how it has achieved most sublime form in its representation

"We follow Ingold's observation that to perceive landscape is "to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (Jana, Pesoutova 33). Also the concept of memory in Buddhist thought finds its origin in the term "Smṛti" and

"Samyak Smriti" (right mindfulness) . For, Gerald Jones, Larson, it is associated with "precessional cosmology" in the present times where *Spirited Away* is a kind of art which evoke the "right mindfulness" and shares the idea of origin, as it has a point itself that traces the origin of this art, because history is cyclical in nature. Art is associated with progression, it is about moving towards a higher consciousness, and we need to understand that memory is associated with the idea of studying the context and discovering connectivity between numerous discourses.

Methodology

The idea of cultural appropriation now is associated with the anime culture , the art of Studio Ghibli is far away from it. The purpose of memory in any culture is to trace the roots , we trace the roots so the future tree is nourished. Memory is the source; it has everything a culture has and had to work on. Customs, rituals, practices, signs and symbolism are cultural signifiers, in present context they are digitally transferred, they have become what we understand as "digital textures". Memory carries the essence which is a part of the culture, it often represents the history when in literature we study new historicism, it is tracing the history back and studying it. Memory defines the new in the old. They form the guiding patterns in any culture. It is a mnemonic device to study the literature through a formalistic approach associated with resonated textures of past. The artefacts appear alive and speak to the curious observers in multiple ways. There are numerous examples in modern literature , one of the very famous modern poet ,Phillip Larkin in his poem

called "The Church Going", in this poem he visits the church and evokes the idea of what is lost , the purpose of memory to define here the lost world of Christianity where church is lost , the value system in times, he questions what will happen of the churches when belief is lost what change. will come in our thinking patterns? are we just going to follow the trends or there is something more worthy in life when curiosity will overcome the need of the time. There are numerous examples which understands the idea of memory in literature and culture. Cultural studies is the new way of understanding the literature and how prominent theoretical and cultural artefacts could be studied in the cultural turn of poststructuralist movement. Here the idea of studying a text is associated with the discourse, we study the memory text by understanding the contextualisation and also re-contextualisation of the philosophical, aesthetical, and cultural space. Memory text study the collective consciousness, the timeless and aspects of orality and myths in art. "Commemoration" (Casey, Edward) is a term shared by the critic is a "public space" (Kuhn, Annette) of memory that has ritual-like quality. Alasdair MacIntyre, has coined the term "philosophical imagination", and we will understand how it is associated with the texture of aesthetical space inducing memory. Texture is the experiential quality of the text it has qualities which are associated with attractiveness, engagement, empathetic dimension, activity space, colour, light and darkness, fullness, audible and aesthetic distance. Texture must bear a "resonance" which is associated with "nexus" which finds origin in the word meaning

"to bind", it is the network which forms the centre, so a texture has a centre. Studying the space of memory is to relive the idea of centre. The concept of centre is lost in postmodern culture. Animated film *Spirited Away* is the "nexus" which defines the culture. A culture which has lost its spirit. The character of Chihiro has lost the way and now through cultural ritualistic cleaning she's discovering it back. In many ways she is discovering the *wabi* aesthetic in the extravagant space of bath house as depicted in the film. There is a cultural synthesis on the account of presentation in the film. Also the culture is associated with performances and the kind of art, artist creates define the purpose. Memory's origin lies in performance. Performance and embodiment are intertwined and generate cultural memories which is beautifully reflected in the film.

Results

Spirited Away (2001) is a journey of a child in the world of spirits (of Japanese in nature). The bathhouse denotes the process of cleaning associated with its symbolic cultural purity. The character of Chihiro in the film is Confucian in its character depiction, when she performs the task, the red color denotes the warrior spirit in the child, there are many spirits in the bathhouse, a multidimensional texture of religion and culture. The Noh face evokes the idea of Japanese theatre, of kabuki and others, a picture of child stuck in the world of adults, focusing cultural reformation and transformation. It is a journey of the child where the character of Chihiro realizes her identity, she gives a test to save her parents and she wins it, as the writer is trying to justify

what is pure; the essence of the other world is to restore what is wrong in oneself. Chihiro is lethargic in beginning, becomes active as the story evolves, she is curious to learn unlike the other spirit of the bathhouse. A creative evolution is seen in the character of Chihiro but not in other characters of the bathhouse. *Spirited away* has become a cultural artifact it evokes desire, the texture evokes the sensorial experience of the past, present and future, light has a deep symbolism, an aura is created by the artist, a world through the perception of the child to learn what life was and had become in postmodern times. The Shinto Tradition and the artists spirit embodiment in the art creates the feeling of aesthetic that is *mono no aware* (the pathos of things), *wabi sabi* (beauty in the state of transition) which the titular character Chihiro manifests *yugen* (the profound idea of beauty) the characters evokes this feeling in the drama (Noh in the art) where we engage ourselves in the aesthetics of past. There are signs which signify cultural memory, it is the beauty in transition of culture. The Bathhouse evokes the idea of postmodern culture, fragmentation and the spirits there are anthropomorphic in nature, one needs to learn from the character of Haku, the human whose spirit animal is snake. The other spirits are ugly and lost because they are greedy, there is cultural degradation and it is recovered through art. The seven deadly sins become the texture of bathhouse, the marks of villainy reminds us of the similar villainy to the character of the "Duchess (Alice in a Wonderland) suffers from macrocephaly (enlarged head)" (A. Chatterjee, 2022) as mentioned by the critic Hartung, Franziska. Also

the witch suffers from the large head in the *Spirited Away* it remarks about how physical attributes are affected by psychological being as well. When we study the conceptualization of cultural Memory it is associated with the psychological aspects of aesthetics as well which are associated with neuroaesthetics. In which we understand, A. Chatterjee writes,

“people not only pay greater attention to faces with anomalies but also simultaneously inhibit social and emotional responses”(54)

The pigs in the story evoke the idea of greed in humanity and since they are being slaughtered later as a food in the film is symbolic of culmination , result of human greed. The bathhouse is the representation of sin and full of pastiche and parodying the postmodern cultural life.

Memory as a philosophical imagination is associated with the philosophy of Dogen the Japanese philosopher, where treating things with respect is the ethics of Japanese culture.

“Use honorific forms of verbs for describing how to handle rice, vegetables; salt , and soy sauce; do not use plain language for this” (2017,J. Baird Callicott, and James McRae)

Also the philosophical understanding of the bathhouse is associated with the beauty of soul “tathāgatagarbha”(Buddha-womb). Narrative has the power of manifestation. Womb rules creativity to manifest the highest “seeds of Buddhahood”, to become the best version of who we are. For kukai , another important Japanese philosophical thinker, the three

important philosophical virtues were, “ritual gesture”(mudra), incantation of voice(mantra) and visionary cosmic imagination of mind(mandala) and inexplicability of “oceanic essence” to “awaken the faith”.(kukai) All these features are the part of memory as manifested in the art of master animator Hayao Miyazaki. Ritualistic correction of the bathhouse spirits , incantation of sensorial voice of the artistic vision creating a oceanic essence of subliminal force . Film depicts such force when Chihiro is on an archetypical heroic journey. The film awaken a faith which is necessarily for the future generation where the child is the future of humanity and is wise to differentiate righteousness from evil overcoming the ego in ones being. There are minute details about which the director and the artist is concerned like the imagery of little tori gates over the trees , the symbolism is associated with how these threes have spirit in them , they are the gateway to the world that is alive, this kind of sentiment critics have often hailed for the art of studio Ghibli as “romantic sublime” , “eco-critical sublime” but here when we understand that memory is something which is deeply affecting to our mind and over the level of our consciousness, so the art of Hayao Miyazaki *Spirited Away* depicts “Neural Sublime”. Neuro-aesthetics is the new emerging way of understanding the research experience, in this we study about why we like certain objects of experience and dislike others. It uses neuro-scientific methods to characterize. Francis Hutcheson in 1725 mentioned that human mind is equipped with “a faculty of taste” . The sensations created in art are the basis of judgement. Neuroimaging helps scientists to

study human brain, which is triggered by “aesthetical objects”. They study the stimuli encountered. Evaluation of art on the basis of figures proves that human respond to such “aesthetic observations”. The idea of text in neurocognitive poetics, as mentioned in neurocognitive poetics, the three ideas we study is “cognitive affective” basis of literary reading, is to review pertinent results of emotion and text processing and to study current challenges and future perspectives. Studying the Jakobson hypothesis and the fiction feeling hypothesis (the affective and aesthetic process of reading) linking it to the “ancient emotion circuits”(2015,A.M.Jacob,178)”. From reading pleasure to repertoire leads to schema activation, where fiction reading bears familiarity, fear and suspense are the features of left hemisphere and foregrounding of text is associated with reward, self reflection, slowness and aesthetic feelings which are associated with right hemisphere. The film *Spirited Away* deals with the foregrounding elements and tropes are associated with simultaneous feelings and it is important to trace the network of such aesthetic function through emotions as every scene of Chihiro bears certain emotions of pain, fear, anger and realization. Tracing the origin of memory in the text act as a reminder of self-reflection of the past world of spirits, nature and being a child. Hayao Miyazaki’s art as a neural sublime evokes past memories which are termed as “testimonies”. They interact and evoke the new form of it.

“we must not forget that everything starts not from the archives, but from testimony and thatwe have nothing better than testimony, in the

final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past”(Ricoeur, 2004,147)

And *Spirited away* is the testimony of the past but it is of the present as well. In Japanese culture uncluttering is associated with the idea of *kanso*, in the film we see that how the character of Chihiro uncluttered herself from the bathhouse spirits and showed the true meaning of journey. Another aesthetic categorization is about revelation which is a slow process emerging through the journey of characters in film, it’s the mystery which is termed as

Shibui/Shibusa in Japan. There is a beautiful scene in the film where Haku offers food to Chihiro which magically reminds her of her existence as Kirei (clean and beautiful). She is in the garden, just like a human flower arranged just like the art of *Ikebana*. The film also act as a reminder about the *Ukiyo-e* traditional Japanese prints as *Fukei-ga* which are the landscapes in Japanese culture. The bathhouse reminds us of the deep dark space and gold which that creates the light also when we view it ethically, Chihiro and Haku are the symbols of light in darkness. Memory is associated with a multifarious space, it shares with us past, and also the individual understanding of the artist that represents the social. Material and psychological space of art as well. For which Antonio Gramsci writes,

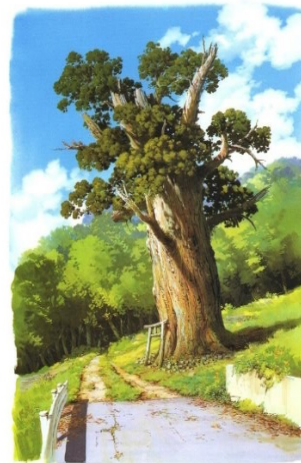
Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level of one’s own conception of reality. Consciousness of being part of a particular

hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one. (1971: 333)

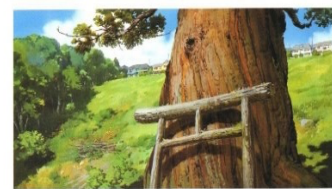
In Cultural studies, the practice of power politics is depicted in the film where there is power struggle in the bathhouse, when the owner of the bathhouse spirit makes other spirits work for her using spells and making them forget their identity somewhere it is reminding of cultural materialism and also magical realism which is the old tale of magic but at the end morality wins, which is idea about victory of righteousness and purity which Japanese culture depict. One's consciousness should attain refinement which is the purpose of any artistic creation even when the situation is hegemonic in nature, that is the reality of culture. Evoking the memory is to connect the past, present and future and to create a digital cosmos that necessarily absorbs the artistic grandeur of the cultural textuality. This film act as a tale that detoxifies the culture and creating such art is giving space to soul rather than the mechanized spirit, because bathhouse represents the mechanism of the modern society. This film finds its nature connected to the dimensions if heart. There are feelings associated with the art of Hayao Miyazaki. The art has its association with the traditional cultural memory of Calm contemplation. In the art of calligraphy, the artist personality emerges as it was always their but the artist makes its way through realization. Similar is the journey of Chihiro, she discovers herself, it is the new birth while paradoxical nature of this truth is that, it was always a part of her being. There is inherent goodness in her

nature that proves her worth in time, she represents the tradition in contemporary degraded surroundings as depicted beautifully in the film and we as the readers discovered memory of the past and present. How beautiful is the art of the artist that it act as a reminder for the future generations as well. It acted as a beautiful folktale of love and hope which appears contemporary as well.

Figure Legends



2

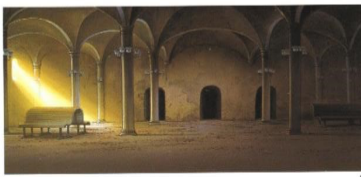
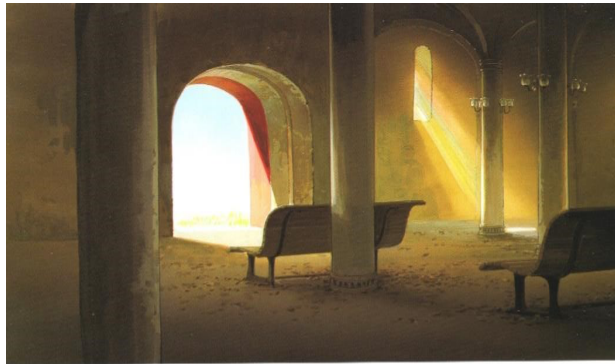


3

Fig.1 Miyazaki, H. (2002). *The art of Miyazaki's Spirited away*

Figure 1: The film depicts the sacred tori gates in

the Japanese culture. Chihiro enters the world of spirits through one such portal of life.



1-2: The wide open space inside the tunnel Chihiro's family enters. (background)
 3-4: The building resembles an abandoned train station. A bright ray of sun pours in through the stained glass window. (background)

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Fig 2. Miyazaki, H. (2002). *The art of Miyazaki's Spirited away*

Figure 2: The film depicts the gates again, the idea of life being a passage.



1: Haku running quickly, leading Chihiro.
 2: Dark storage room filled with rows and rows of pickle barrels.
 3: Food storage room containing giant fish, meat, and birds; seat tents, piled all over the concrete floor, or hanging from the ceiling. (background)
 4: The bath house looming above at night. The deformed beings who cross the bridge, approaching the glowing entrance.

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Fig.3 Miyazaki, H. (2002). *The art of Miyazaki's Spirited away*.

Figure 3. Depicts the Bathhouse as mentioned in the film. Here the spirits live as depicted in the film.

Conclusion

There is hunger in the texture, hunger in parents, hunger in workers and their leader of bathhouse for gold, also the character of no-face is the extreme hungry spirit one finds in the film. The idea of penumbra which is "a space of partial illumination (as in an eclipse) between the perfect shadow on all sides and the full light" as defined in Merriam Webster, is depicted in the character of Chihiro and the beauty created by

Hayao Miyazaki, while the shadowy aspect is associated with the darkness in the soul of the characters but realized through esteemed shadows in the art of Hayao Miyazaki as depicted in the film. There is a world that is visible and the other that is invisible. and the theme color of the film was red and technique of "highlighting, reducing and reflecting" (Takehige) , as mentioned in the art of *Spirited Away*.

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