

Did America Really Understand "Spirited Away"?



■ Akemi Yoshida

Hayao Miyazaki's *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (Spirited Away) wins an Academy award and goes into wide release in America, while President Bush pontificates about the conflict between "good" and "evil." America is where the line between good and evil is always drawn unmistakably in cartoons and cinema, and where good almost always triumphs in the end. How did a film like "Spirited Away" that depicts the land of "myriads of gods," the naturalistic ideal that there is a god in every creation, do so well there?

Japan, the land of myriads of gods. Chihiro finds herself lost in a magical bathhouse for the gods. The film was released by Disney in America as "Spirited Away." Can the people of a land where most of the religions are monotheistic really understand such a story?

There is a story about famous *manga* artist Ryuichi Yokoyama, who happened during the middle of World War II to view a print of Disney's *Snow White* at the

Education Ministry. Astounded by its beauty, Yokoyama announced, "Japan has lost the war." At the time, Disney animation was light-years ahead of anything in Japan, as the persistence of this anecdote illustrates, but today Japanese animation seems unstoppable in America. *Pokémon* and other anime characters are wildly popular, and many Japanese anime TV shows can be seen on American cable television. The range of choice for American cartoon lovers has thus broadened considerably in just a few years, but animated classics like "Snow White," as well as stories of heroes like *Superman* and *Batman* that are steeped in concepts of right and wrong and justice remain strongly rooted in terms of enduring popularity.

The plot lines of most American anime revolve around the fight between good and evil, with the good guys winning out in the end. Even if good does not win out, and the ending is ambiguous, the essential goodness or evil of the individual characters never changes within the story. With some important exceptions, this type of storyline is also

strong in Japanese anime. Perhaps the most unique aspect of Miyazaki's films is that he does not strongly delineate any of his characters as being "good guys" or "bad guys."

In today's world, it is less and less likely that things can be seen in such simple black and white terms, and in this sense films like "Spirited Away" are actually more realistic. American reviews of "Spirited Away" generally began and ended with words of accolade, raising a few points of criticism in between. The film's record-breaking popularity in Japan earned filmmakers more than 234 million dollars. It won the Annie award from the ASIFA-Hollywood International Animated Film Society and the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival besides the Academy award for best animated feature this year. So perhaps I am setting myself too difficult a task to find fault with the incredible reception this film has garnered.

However, many American reviewers talked about "Spirited Away" as if it were just a fantasy, on a par with "Alice in Wonderland" or "The Wizard of Oz," and praised it mainly for the high quality of its story on a

fantasy level and of the animation on a technical level. They seemed to have missed its essential strong point, which is that the characters are not simplistically divided between "good guys" and "bad guys," and in fact the film resolves itself by bringing a happy ending to each character. Also, though the subtitles are faithful to the original in translating the Japanese "*kamisama*" as "gods," many reviewers of the film explain these gods as being more like "spirits," which seems easier for Americans to understand. Some even used the term "threatening creatures." In Japan, even an evil god is still a god, so to see this rather low expression used to describe them made me feel a bit sad.

Some reviewers did not seem to think these spirits were gods at all, and in one extreme example seemed to think the bathhouse was just an imaginary island of ghosts. If "Spirited Away" seems to be just the Japanese version of "Alice in Wonderland" to you, then certainly it makes little difference whether these spirits are gods or ghosts. I think the sequence where Chihiro helps the god of the river that has become polluted is one of the most important in the film, but it seems that this part as well was not really comprehended. Perhaps a small child would have some trouble making the connection between the river and the pollution if they just viewed this sequence without any additional explanation. Regarding the depiction of good and evil, the New York Times review said, "No other animator is so skilled at depicting moral transformation, from what we thought was good, to something evil." Hollywood.com, which gave the film three stars, said "Nothing is clearly depicted as being either good or evil in this film, unlike American animated films." We can relax a little when we read words of understanding like this from people who seem to be really seeing the film for what it is. But Hollywood.com did close

its review with the characterization, "Brilliant, fantastical and at times confusing," which rankles a bit.

"Spirited Away" was released in Japan just around the time of the US-Afghan conflict, and was sometimes used to illustrate the anti-Bush viewpoint that was critical of his view of the world situation as a "conflict between good and evil." Although the Japanese world view that even among gods there can be gods who do bad things, and that things cannot be simply divided between good and evil, has long seemed to be out of synch with the prevailing American

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view that tends to divide everything into good and evil, the reaction to the statements about "good and evil" by Bush make it very clear that many Americans understand only too well that this is good and evil as seen by the American point of view. They understand obviously that looking at it from the other side would yield exactly the opposite viewpoint, and I do not mean to assert that Americans are incapable of looking at things from varying viewpoints. When devising wartime slogans, it is certainly necessary to draw clear battle lines at some point. Stories where good and evil are clearly depicted are easier to understand for anyone, not just for Americans who were raised

with stories of superheroes and justice. Thus, it is hard to believe that "Spirited Away" was completely misunderstood in America. Although reviews that emphasized the fantasy element of the film were in the majority, the New York Times and others wrote fairly deep analyses of the movie, and Miyazaki's work remains quite popular here.

Among ordinary viewer's impressions of the film, there were two main types: many said the first half was great but they were disappointed in the second half because it was cliched and Disney-like. The rest said the first half was boring and the second half was exciting. It seems that viewers who are familiar with Miyazaki's work tended to find the first half better. I also heard some rather painful appraisals, such as "I hated it after the first 15 minutes there are much more deserving Japanese anime than this." Those kind of comments can only be chalked up to a basic incompatibility.

It is indisputable that "Spirited Away" garnered accolades from the majority of American film critics, and took the Academy Award this year, so even if ordinary Americans do not see past the fantasy aspect of the film, as long as there are enough movie reviewers who can see the deeper meaning of the film, the heart of the film will eventually become better understood by the general public. Certainly film fans in both Japan and America often use movie reviews and criticism to supplement their own understanding of a film, especially one that they didn't quite get, and may even get together in Internet chat rooms to talk about their own takes on the film.

Really, the question with any film is if it is powerful enough to cause people to want to discuss it and re-interpret it. I believe that "Spirited Away" in America certainly was that powerful a movie. ①

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