

Food in *Spirited Away*: Consuming with Intent

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Introduction

I was a young girl when I first watched *Spirited Away*, or *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (2001), by Japanese animator, writer, director, and producer Hayao Miyazaki. I was instantly drawn into his fictional universe, seduced not only by the warm colors, strong, female characters, and beautiful animations, but also by the glittering, abundant food. Licking my lips, I would close my eyes and hope, at least for a moment, I could be transported, or *spirited away*, to the fictional universe I saw before me on the screen. Now that I am an adult, I have seen the film a half dozen more times and, more recently, have spent hours analyzing it for this thesis. And each time, without fail, I find myself spirited away for the two hours' duration of the film. Each time noticing different details and aspects that interest me. I am not alone in admiring or studying this film rather it was a huge economic success in Japan. It remained the highest grossing film in Japanese history from 2001-2015 (Napier, 2006). In 2002, it also won an Oscar for best-animated feature in the United States, showcasing its ability to reach audiences globally. Moreover, within academic research, fields ranging from Japanese history and cultural studies to ecological economics have studied and have been similarly transported, like me, into Miyazaki's world. While much of the existing research focuses on themes of nostalgia or environmental activism or Miyazaki's love of hand-drawn animation, I hope to provide a new lens by looking specifically at the role of food and eating. I position three iconic food scenes from the film, alongside specific historical and cultural moments in Japan, in order to ask how food and the way in which one eats shapes their identity and food culture.

The film begins with 10-year-old Chihiro Ogino (Rumi Hiragi) and her parents (Takashi Naitô and Yasuko Sawaguichi) driving to a new home in a development bordering the

countryside. On their way, Chihiro's father takes a wrong turn that leads them to a strange tunnel in the forest. Against Chihiro's requests to turn around, her parents decide to explore on foot, and, on the other side of the tunnel, discover what they believe is a mountain village. While the streets and buildings are empty, the restaurants have counters and tables piled with glistening, hot food. Tempted by the smells, Chihiro's parents grab plates and begin piling them with Taiwanese sausages, roasted sweet potatoes, dumplings, bitter melon, and king mushrooms (Goldberg, 2016). No one is around for them to pay, but the parents do not worry because they have "credit cards and cash" in case someone returns (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 2001). While Chihiro's parents begin gorging themselves, Chihiro, who is horrified by their gluttonous behavior, decides to explore instead and meets a young boy named Haku, who warns her to leave before sunset. Chihiro goes to find her parents but discovers, startlingly, they have turned into pigs and have eaten almost everything in sight. Night falls, and she discovers that the village is actually a giant spa-retreat for spirits. The food Chihiro's parents have eaten was intended for the spirits and not suitable for human consumption. With her parent's transformation, they are unable to leave and become trapped in the spirit world. The rest of the film centers on her quest to save her parents and return to the human world by negotiating and working with the spirits. She is eventually successful and is able to return home with her family (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 2001).

In interviews and writings on the film, Miyazaki has made clear that his primary goal in *Spirited Away* is to show the maturation of an ordinary girl in the face of bizarre, fantastical encounters (Merlet & Miyazaki, 2001). The film mixes humor, sentiment, and horror with dazzling imagery, providing an effective coming-of-age story with an arguably upbeat ending.

However, in an interview in 2011, Miyazaki also highlighted the scene when the parents are guzzling food into their mouths and are slowly transformed into pigs. Miyazaki said the scene was inspired by contemporary Japan. He observes how, in modern times, the Japanese eat food from all over the world “and just keep eating” (Ross & Miyazaki, 2011). On Japanese television, one only sees elegant, highly constructed cooking shows, so Miyazaki wanted to show a more realistic portrayal of the Japanese kitchen (both the good and the bad). To do so, Miyazaki has intertwined a large mixture of foods, along with themes of gluttony and over-consumption as portrayed through Chihiro’s parents.

Some of the food in *Spirited Away* is traditionally Japanese: *onigiri* (rice balls), which date back to the Heian period, *konpeito* (traditional, brightly colored Japanese sugar candies), *ishi-yaki-imo* (stone-roasted sweet potatoes), and *ikameshi* (a Hokkaido dish of rice-stuffed squid simmered in soy sauce). However, a large portion of the food comes from other countries. For example, steamed buns with red bean paste (*anpan*) from China, more Western-style foods like eggs and cheese, and Taiwanese goodies, like sausages, sweet and salty rice cakes filled with yam or red beans, translucent meat dumplings, and peanut ice cream, all make appearances (Goldberg, 2016). The mixture of food in *Spirited Away* highlights the unique, multicultural nature of contemporary Japanese cuisine. However, as Miyazaki expresses, the parent’s transformation acts as a sharp critique of over-consumption in contemporary Japanese society. Although it should be acknowledged that the film contains many celebratory moments, its powerful depictions of alienation and gluttony imply a more pessimistic subtext.

Thus, throughout this thesis, using a food film theorist’s lens, I explore food and eating in *Spirited Away*. In film, food often acts as a driving force in the films’ narrative structure,

connecting (or disconnecting) characters from one another. Although not labeled a “food film,” *Spirited Away* still utilizes common tropes found in the food film genre, like frequent food close-ups and amplified sounds and lighting (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2016). I ask how these food scenes further the films’ narrative and act as markers for cultural difference, historical change, and otherness in Japan.

While I am primarily analyzing *Spirited Away*, I have also situated the film in Miyazaki’s larger body of work and will reference common themes or differences from such other films as, *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989), and *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004). Additionally, I draw upon literature in film and media studies, anthropology of Japan, and history, as well as popular media commentary on Miyazaki’s other films and Japanese food culture. Although the history of Japanese cuisine is, of course, too rich and complicated to capture in a single analysis, I pull out specific threads that encapsulate some of the major questions and problems of the era. Specifically, I focus on key aspects of how Japan’s cuisine has changed post-World War II and explore two main research questions more in depth:

- i) Why did dietary changes take place in Japan and how are these changes portrayed throughout *Spirited Away*?
- ii) How do changes in the Japanese diet reflect and shape Japanese identity, food culture, and the increasing globalized world?

Kokusaika vs. Furusato

Hayao Miyazaki portrays contemporary Japan’s complex cultural identity throughout his films. His films span from the Mediterranean/European setting of *Kiki’s Delivery Service* (1989)

to the French-and-English-inspired *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) to the nostalgic, 1950s Japanese farming community in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) and the radically reworked fourteenth-century Japan in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) (Napier, 2006a). All four films engage deeply with two trends that have dominated Japanese society over the last three decades and can be summed up with two catchwords: *kokusaika* (internationalization) and *furusato* (native place or old hometown). According to scholar Jennifer Robertson, these arcs, while “appearing to represent opposite trajectories” actually “exist conterminously as refractive processes and products, and... together they index the ambiguity of Japanese national identity and its tense relationship with cultural identity (or identities)” (Napier, 2006a, pg. 287). The tenacious connection between internationalization and native place highlights how neither Japanese culture nor tradition is self-contained or self-evident, as some presume. Rather, ideas, things, practices, and even food shift continuously over time, containing traces of past influences and specific moments in history.

While Miyazaki's work interweaves *kokusaika* and *furusato* categories, his 2001 film *Spirited Away* engages with European Romanticism, native Japanese Shrine Shinto tradition, and Taiwanese landscapes, causing me to argue it occupies a more ambiguous space and time. At first glance, *Spirited Away* seems to celebrate aspects of the native Japanese Shrine Shinto tradition, which is embodied in the belief of *kami*, or the spiritual essences of things (Napier, 2006a). The film's primary visual theme is a magical bathhouse of gods, where river spirits, coal spirits, and even a radish spirit coexist. Additionally, the bathhouse locale nods to traditional rituals in which villagers call forth local *kami* to bathe in their baths (Swale, 2015). Thus, while Miyazaki's specific vision of *furusato* represents a large part of the *mise-en-scene* of *Spirited*

Away, the film's narrative trajectory – as discussed above – revolves around the tension between Japanese cultural identity and otherness. The idea of what “Japaneseness” means in a changing world is called into question.

One way to explore the tensions between *furusato* and *kokusaika* is through the mixture of foods found in *Spirited Away* (which I do in the next major section) and Japan, more generally. Historically, the Japanese have created a “highly complex, highly original” cuisine that pulls from its natural climate, as well as importations (Ashkenazi, 1991, pg. 287). From central Japan to the south, east, and north, a variety of crops, like grains (e.g. millet), pulses (notably beans), dried fish, and root crops, have become staples. Foreign foods have also been introduced, absorbed, and made part of the native cuisine in Japan. For example, prior to the fifteenth century, *tofu* (bean curd) was first introduced from China, while hot peppers and some cooking styles were introduced by Korea. These have been accepted into Japanese cuisine as “Japanese foods” (*washoku*), whereas other more distinct foods have maintained their “foreign” nature (Ashkenazi, 1991).

With the arrival of Europeans at the end of the fifteenth century, a new list of foods was added into Japan's cuisine. Items such as maize, potatoes, and sponge cake were introduced, and, with time, these too have become recognized as “Japanese,” not foreign foods (Ashkenazi, 1991). Another wave of importations occurred after the opening of Japan in 1868, with Western-style dishes and foods quickly being accepted and given uniquely Japanese twists. This process of adoption is not slowing down; rather, it has only increased since World War II. Immediately after the war, Japan was suffering from food shortages. In order to combat starvation, Japan began relying on aid programs from the U.S. to feed its students and citizens.

Many of the school lunches provided were Western in nature, including items like omelets, meat dishes, and sandwiches, which are found in *Spirited Away* (Gaouette, 1998). Many students who grew up in the postwar period still hold these dietary preferences, and they have since grown up and are feeding their own children a similar diet. In fact, according to a 2013 online survey conducted by Kikkoman, the children of housewives aged 20-60 living in the Tokyo and Kansai regions similarly expressed a slight preference for Western dishes, or *yōshoku*. For example, families with children in elementary school preferred Western foods 36% to *washoku*; for those with middle schoolchildren it was 34%, and for those with high school students the difference was 24% (Rath, 2016).¹ While the survey did not specify what types of Western foods were preferred, meat dishes with beef and pork, fried foods, and spaghetti are typical in Japan.

In 2015, East Asian studies scholar Semeraro Alessio conducted another survey studying the eating habits of 200 Japanese people with ages varying between 18-60+. Regardless of age, 30% of interviewees ate Western food more than three times per week. In addition, he found 80% of the interviewees believed there had been a change in contemporary Japan's eating habits and that 70% saw Western influences as the main reason. While Japan's dietary preferences have become increasingly Western and multicultural, there has simultaneously been a decline in fish and vegetable consumption typical of *washoku*. According to Alessio, this change in diet carries some ambivalence among Japanese people. Almost 50% of his

¹ Prior to WWII, exclusively Japanese aristocracy and foreigners consumed Western cuisine in Japan. Thus, although the percentages in the survey are relatively low, they are still significant. The desire for *yōshoku* among children highlight not only the impact Western foods have had on young generation's eating habits but also the potential threat for local and traditional food consumption (Alessio, 2016).

interviewees' aged 18-29 believed Japanese people should eat more *washoku*, and 80% of all interviewees agreed *washoku* should be preserved (Alessio, 2016). I argue throughout this thesis that the ambivalence towards Japan's evolving foodscape can be seen throughout *Spirited Away's* narrative and food portrayals, as well. As a nation, there is both a desire to hold onto tradition, or *furusato*, while simultaneously embracing change and globalization, or *kokusaika* (Gaouette, 1998; Ashkenazi, 1991). Throughout this thesis I come back to these two terms, as well as pull from the existing pool of research regarding Japanese culture and food, visuals in film, and ideas of modernity and Japanese anime and film.

Literature Review

Japanese Culture and Food

Scholars specializing in the anthropology of Japan, like Michael Ashkenazi and Jeanne Jacob, have been analyzing the Japanese meal as a cultural form for over 25 years (Ashkenazi, 1991; Ashkenazi, 2004; Ashkenazi & Jacob, 2003). Taking a broad approach, scholars Ashkenazi and Jacob analyze the fluidity and transformation of Japanese society and culture (Ashkenazi, 1991; Ashkenazi & Jacob, 2003). Specifically, recognizing that Japanese culture has “never been a sealed box” but rather “has always been in interaction with other cultures” which continue to influence and transform Japanese society (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1990). In terms of food, since Japan's early history, Japan has quickly accepted, adopted, and modified foreign cultural practices and food items. For instance, Buddhism was introduced by Korea in the sixth century, and the Japanese, after a period of resistance, adopted the new religion and some of its meatless cuisine and aesthetics to coexist with Shintoism. The process of Japanization with food

has only increased in the past 50 years. The Japanese have adopted a large number of products, like hamburgers, butter, and cheese from the United States; coconut jelly from Southeast Asia; and jute leaves from the Middle East (Ashkenazi & Jacob, 2003). However, as an anthropologist, Ashkenazi tends to only focus on one dimension of Japanese food culture, analyzing food more as a cultural product rather than looking at its historical context.

Similar to Ashkenazi, the Japanese studies scholar Katarzyna Cwiertka argues that multiculturalism is a defining feature of the culinary scene in contemporary Japan. An average day may begin with a Western-style breakfast of toast, coffee, and fried eggs, or a Japanese-style breakfast of rice, *miso* soup, pickles, and grilled fish. Lunch may be either a Japanese-style *obentō* (a boxed meal of rice and several small side dishes), prepared at home or purchased at a kiosk, or a quick bite at a fast-food restaurant. A dinner may be taken at home or at any of the previous lunch establishments (Cwiertka, 2006). For present-day Japan, rice, soy sauce, and fresh seafood are ultimate symbols of “Japaneseness,” and yet these are only relatively recent ingredients (Cwiertka, 2006). Cwiertka complicates the traditional Japanese meal, by arguing how, throughout Japanese history, there was never enough rice, soy sauce, or seafood to feed everybody or become staples. Only in modern times has the Japanese foodscape transformed to allow such foods to become universally affordable and available.

Eric Rath, a Japanese cultural historian, further reveals how class cultures, national institutions, and economic change have shaped what the Japanese eat and what most people think of as typical Japanese cuisine. Rath discusses how the traditional diet, or *washoku*, of rice and side dishes dates back only to the 1960s. According to Rath, *washoku* is an example of “invented tradition,” or a “device of cultural ideology that wraps the present in a mantle of

venerable antiquity, thereby legitimating the social present by calling attention to its presumed antecedents and origins in the cultural sacrosanct past” (Rath, 2016, pg. 29). In other words, *washoku* is an ideal, which falsely represents Japan’s food history as remaining unchanged for the last four decades. However, as Rath shows, Japan’s cuisines are ever changing, not static.

While Cwiertka and Rath offer an alternative model for conceptualizing traditional food, what the scholars fail to do is place food within a wider agricultural system. One other body of literature that helps explore the place of food in Japan comes from scholars analyzing Japan from more of a demographic and economic perspective. Scholars in the field of agricultural economics, for example, suggest that dietary changes in Japan are partially due to Japan’s lack of self-sufficiency in food production, which was at a low rate of 41% in 2010 (Taha, 1993; Yoshikawa, 2010). Due to limited arable land (only 13% of the total area), high production costs, an aging agricultural population, and low revenue, fewer people in Japan want to become farmers. For instance, in 1960, 11.8 million people in Japan farmed, whereas only 1.90 million farmed in 2009, with 61% being 65 years or older (Yoshikawa, 2010). As a result, Japan has had to heavily rely on agricultural imports from Western countries, which has dramatically transformed the Japanese diet (Taha, 1993). Because these researchers are concerned primarily with food security and global food production, their emphasis is quite different from scholars in the fields reviewed above. Together, these various perspectives provide a well-rounded understanding of the place of food, which aims to take into account not only culturalist explanations but also the political, economic, and material dimensions of food production.

Visuals in Film

As contemporary Japan has had to become more Western over time, both in terms of cuisine and values, new avenues of research have opened up. Some scholars in media studies, for instance, are interested in media portrayals that critique growing globalized culture and consumerism. The media studies scholar Alistair Swale, for instance, focuses on the themes of nostalgia and memory found in *Spirited Away*. In the film, there is a character named “No-face” (*Kaonashi*), who gorges itself with food and is only “cured” after it receives an ancient medical substance, which allows it to purge everything it has eaten (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 2001). Swale theorizes that the over-consumption of the *Kaonashi* represents themes of lost identity and malaise for contemporary Japan. Although unknown what Miyazaki’s intentions were with the *Kaonashi*, Swale writes that the film has a normative message that valorizes traditional values such as selflessness, as represented by the herbal medicine (Swale, 2015).

Scholars in the food film genre, like Anne Bower, Cynthia Baron, and Laura Lindenfeld and Fabio Parasecoli, similarly use visuals – of food and the act of consuming – as a medium to analyze film. They also, when it comes to defining food films, argue that the films tend to point to an “emerging genre or subgenre” that is more expansive than originally thought to be (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2016). For instance, in *Reel Movies*, Anne Bower discusses how *all* film genres, not just well known “food films” like *Big Night* or *Chocolat*, use food as a way to communicate. Indeed, a film does not need to be labeled as a “food film” or even have food play a central role in order for it to be an essential element in a film. Often, the way characters interact with food, she argues, will underscore thematic points in a film.

For instance, although Miyazaki's films are not labeled food films, I argue food plays an essential role not only in *Spirited Away* but also in his other films, like *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). For instance, *My Neighbor Totoro* depicts a nostalgic Japanese farming community that focuses on two young sisters and the magical creatures that inhabit their world (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 1988). Some of the foods consumed in the film, like *obentōs*, have a strong connection to the traditional Japanese kitchen and home, which arguably places the film around the 1950s and 60s (Allison, 1993).² Whereas, in the three latter films, Miyazaki intertwines Japanese, European, and American food elements, such as bacon, eggs, and cheese, which help communicate a more contemporary Japan and its changing values and lifestyles.

Additionally, filmmakers will use food to portray "important aspects of characters' emotions, along with their personal and cultural identities" through specific camera techniques (i.e. extreme close-ups or amplified sounds), settings (kitchens, restaurants, or dining rooms), and the film's narrative arc (Bower, 2004, pg. 1). In terms of Miyazaki's films, scholar Daisuke Akimoto looks at *The Wind Rises (Kaze Tachinu)*, which follows a Japanese aviation engineer named Jiro Horikoshi who designed the Japanese fighter planes during WWII (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 2013). Although not labeled a food film, Akimoto explores some of the food eaten in order to analyze the characters in the film further. In his analysis, he notes Jiro's preference for fish rather than red meat. During WWII, consuming red meat, which is considered a Western-style food, was one way for the Japanese to redefine themselves in relation to the West.

² Because Miyazaki's films incorporate magical and mystical elements, I am cautious of placing any of his films in a specific time period. However, many scholars and viewers, who grew up during WWII, argue the film's depiction of nature, simplistic foods, and nostalgic memories portray the sort of humble life many lived in the post-WWII era (Okuhara, 2006).

According to Akimoto's analysis, Jiro's rejection of the meat suggests he holds anti-militaristic values (Akimoto, 2013, pg. 166). Thus, what is eaten, not eaten, thrown away, preserved, chopped, baked, shared, or stolen can act as powerful symbolism in many films. With food, directors, like Miyazaki, can convey messages of resentment, love, anger, rebellion, or withdrawal.

Film scholar Cynthia Baron similarly touches on this expanded genre idea; pointing out the significance of the way food is interwoven throughout a film's narrative. Baron argues one can analyze different cinematic choices (editing, framing, camera movement, lighting, mise-en-scene), stories that reference food, the time allotted to various characters, and the general mood of a film to help determine food's relevancy to its plot (Baron, 2006). Although Bower's and Baron's definition of "food film" is expansive, the majority of scholarly articles written about food and film still only focus on a relatively small and well-worn collection, ranging from *Big Night* to *Ratatouille* (Buck, 2015). More and more scholars are challenging this narrow view, though, like scholar Fabio Parasecoli, who analyzed food and masculinity in blockbuster films. The films he analyzed ranged from the drama/disaster film *Titanic* (1997) to the fantasy series of *Harry Potter* (2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007) to the romantic comedy *Pretty Woman* (1990). By analyzing food in blockbuster movies, Parasecoli not only helps broaden what the field of "food films" looks like but also offers new filters through which viewers can analyze and perceive their daily lives (Parasecoli, 2011). While food films in the U.S. have existed since the beginning of moving pictures in the 1890s, the specific subgenre did not emerge until the 1980s with the release of *Babette's Feast* (1987). Thus, because the food film genre is still relatively

new to the table, it is too soon to tell if the genre will be able to maintain itself or be transformed and/or reinvented over time.

In *Food, Film, and Culture*, James Keller offers another way of defining food films – through visual pleasure. He argues films “manipulate gustatory imagery in order to increase the sensory response of the film audience to a medium that cannot access smell or taste, but, nevertheless, seeks to create a full sensory response to a strictly visual and auditory medium” (Keller, 2006, pg. 1). He argues food cinema thus invokes the “gustatory appetite in a fashion similar to the arousal of the libido through romantic and sexual imagery, accessing the full sensory experience of the actor and, subsequently and vicariously, of the audience” (Keller, 2006, pg. 1). In other words, Keller believes filmmakers play up visual and auditory senses through light, color, and sound in order to code food as delicious, unfamiliar, or revolting to audiences, who can never actually consume the food in the film. It also helps round out the perceived “reality” of film; food helps take the place of taste because taste cannot be manifested visually.

Scholars Laura Lindenfeld and Fabio Parasecoli present a contrasting view in *Feasting Our Eyes*, arguing the virtual and actual consumption of food may not be totally separate. Rather, food can be consumed visually and that this “constitutes an act of ingestion that shapes and conditions our sense of taste alongside the actual food we consume” (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2016, pg. 19). Pulling from cultural studies, political economy, gender studies, and ideological criticism, the two scholars discuss how food films inherently affect “people as individuals, as members of diverse cultures, and as citizens” (Greene, 2017). While entertaining, food films also have political, social, and economic stakes that shape and reveal relations of

power, ideas of who belong, and who has voice. Thus, when one consumes with their eyes, they also consume ideas that shape and condition them in real life. Literary scholar Tom Hertweck furthers this idea, suggesting food's impact on today's popular culture extends beyond the visual. Food representations in film, cookbooks, advertisements, or even reality TV have created new forms of sharing, communicating, and thinking about consumption, food, and media culture (Hertweck, 2015). Food is no longer thought to be just a means to keep one alive, and film is no longer thought to be just a means to entertain oneself. Rather, food and film are connected to stories and larger cultural, religious, sexual, and philosophical ideas. Together, these various perspectives provide a broad understanding of the place of food in film and how it can be interpreted.

Japanese Film and Food

Because the genre of food-film is still emerging, research on Japanese film and food is especially limited. The most notable Japanese film that has been explored by film theorists is Juzo Itami's *Tampopo* (1985), a "ramen western" that follows a widow learning how to cook ramen in Japan (Ashkenazi, 2004). Within the film, various foods are consumed, from traditional Japanese buckwheat noodles (*soba*) to European noodles like spaghetti. Although specializing in anthropology, Ashkenazi also uses film theory to interpret *Tampopo*, arguing the film shows how food is absorbed, transformed, and then fitted into Japanese society (2004). East Asian studies scholar Charles Hayford also discusses *Tampopo* in *Food on Film: Bringing Something New to the Table*, arguing to be Japanese is to be cosmopolitan and to eat globally (Hayford, 2015). In *Tampopo's* Japan, foods from all over the globe are consumed. Even ramen,

the main food star, was originally from China but quickly gained success in the 1960s after noodle shops began popping up in Japan. *Tampopo* helps show why food resonates so deeply among filmmakers and scholars. Food production and preparation play an important role in marking racial and ethnic identities. Additionally, in an increasingly multicultural world, questions of who belongs and who does not are represented in the complex relationships often portrayed by food in film.

While I pull from Ashkenazi's and Hayford's analyses, as well as the various media scholars above, the topic of food within Japanese film *is* still underexplored in English. Most academic pieces explore food in *Tampopo* but fail to look at the plethora of Japanese food documentaries that do exist, such as *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011), and *Washoku: Beyond Sushi* (2015). Beyond documentaries, Japanese films like Yasujiro Ozu's *The Taste of Green Tea Over Rice* (1952) and Kenji Mizoguchi's *The Fall of Osan* (1935) both have eating scenes that complicate food and place (Furstenberg, 1994). For instance, in *The Taste of Green Tea Over Rice*, people are always eating at home, in Spanish-themed bars, in small sake shops, and at weddings and funerals. However, I could not find a single academic analysis on the food in these films in English, which creates future academic opportunities.

Japanese Animation

What I found instead was a vast amount of research on Japanese film and the genre of anime, specifically by media theorists and Japan studies scholars like Ian Condry, Thomas Lamarre, Susan Napier, and Eriko Ogihara-Schuck. All four theorists discuss the longevity of animation and its significance within the history of cinema, another important component to

this thesis (Napier, 2006a; Ian Condry, 2013; Thomas Lamarre, 2009; and Ogiwara-Shuck, 2009). Specifically, Condry looks at Japanese animation more generally, discussing how the genre has emerged out of a collective social energy. By operating across multiple industries, be it in film, television, *manga*, or games, Japanese animation has made it possible for fans to directly connect with its creators. Condry argues this fluidity has created collaborative opportunities and is the “soul” of Japanese anime (Condry, 2013). Lamarre similarly takes a broad approach when analyzing anime but looks specifically at the fundamental aspects of Japanese animation. He argues, at the bedrock of Japanese animation, is “open compositing” (as opposed to the “closed compositing” of Disney). Closed composition shows the entire subject within a single frame, whereas open composition shows only part of the subject, giving the frame a sense of mystery and generating the illusion of *anima* (i.e. life, soul, or spirit). Lamarre argues open compositing allows Japanese animation to be freer and more flexible with its movement, as seen with Miyazaki’s open compositing of cell layers in *Spirited Away* (Lamarre, 2009).

While Condry and Lamarre examine anime on its technological fluidity and capability, Susan Napier looks at anime more in terms of Japanese cultural identity. She tightens her lens, as well, by focusing on a single film, *Spirited Away*, rather than Japanese animation as a whole. Napier argues the film is a reaction to globalization and its perceived threat to sustaining Japan’s unique culture and national identity. Ogiwara-Shuck, an American studies scholar, likewise discusses Japanese culture in *Spirited Away* but looks at the American and German receptions of Japanese religious themes in the film. She argues important animistic and spiritual elements may be lost on American and German audiences, which tend to be grounded on Judeo-Christian traditions. Western media, in addition, has translated certain Japanese words

with specific spiritual connotations into words without the same impact in English and German versions of *Spirited Away*, causing Western audiences to comprehend Japanese religious themes differently than Japanese ones. Despite these misunderstandings, or perhaps because of them, *Spirited Away* has been able to gain a huge following among Western audiences and to create an inter-religious dialogue among its viewers. Together, the above scholars discuss not only the role and impact of visual elements and animism in *Spirited Away* but also the role of fans and different audiences.

Modernity and Japanese Film and Media

While some media scholars, such as Swale, Hertweck, and Bower, base their analyses on the use of visual methods and effects, other scholars emphasize the historical context of particular films. Lim Tai Wei, who is in the field of Japanese studies and history, for instance explores themes of over-consumption and greed throughout *Spirited Away*, but he puts these themes into a historical context by comparing contemporary and past eating practices. For instance, many of the values presented in *Spirited Away* go against what Japanese citizens are taught as children, such as not to waste food or overeat (Wei, 2013). It is necessary to note, however, that *Spirited Away* exists in a boundless, timeless realm. Although many writers and scholars believe that the town of Jiufen in Taiwan inspired the film, Miyazaki intertwines Japanese, Taiwanese, European, and American cultural elements, like Shinto mythology, Taiwanese architecture, and Western décor and food, complicating any straightforward historical analysis (Goldberg, 2016).

Other scholars suggest that media portrayals can give insight into questions regarding Japan's place in the world, as well as what a loss of traditional culture means to its citizens. For example, political scientist Patricia Master analyzes the role food plays in Japanese war films, specifically those discussing themes of starvation, as well as the politics of film more generally. One of Master's film analyses looks at two films, *Fires on the Plain* (1959) and *The Good War* (2002), which feature characters searching for food during World War II. According to Master, the characters are not only struggling to survive personally but also to keep the Japanese spirit and identity alive and thriving, like it was in the past (Master, 1994). This nostalgic view of Japan is often written about or portrayed in film as a romanticized vision of a lost past. However, *Spirited Away* intertwines both past and present worlds, complicating the idea that Japan's past and present are completely separate. Thus, while I explore the tension between "traditional" and "modern" cultures, I also parallel the narrative in the film in order to avoid making a simple binary analysis by showing how the two realms can coexist. Specifically, my main analysis looks at the food in *Spirited Away*, dissecting scenes not only with traditional Japanese foods or a more globalized foodscape, but also scenes that have both. I also discuss how historical moments and changes in Japan have impacted the tension and harmony we see between traditional and modern cultures in the film.

Historical Arguments & Significance

It is clear that existing scholarship on contemporary Japanese food culture is vast and longstanding. Additionally, there are a handful of film analyses of *Spirited Away*. Many of these works discuss themes of nostalgia, memory, and modern values like gluttony and greed (Baron,

2006; Master, 1994; Swale, 2015; Wei, 2013). Additionally, popular media discussing Japan's declining agricultural system highlight the country's dependence on foreign agricultural imports (An Alliance of Hope, 2015; Foster, 2015). This dependence partially influences the Westernization of the Japanese diet. However, while much research on Japanese culture, food, and film exists, there is little academic research on the role of food in *Spirited Away* specifically. Some of the above scholars tend to overlook food as a tool to analyze cultural and historical change in Japan. Those who do explore the role of food often see it as a static entity within a specific culture and place – something that merely reflects culture rather than helps to create it.

I, however, am looking at the adaptability and transformation of food, as well as the connections between seemingly far-flung places like Japan and the United States. Thus, by building upon current research in all three fields, my hope is to fill this existing gap in scholarship and to demonstrate the importance of food in cultural portrayals as well as in everyday life. Studio Ghibli, the producer of *Spirited Away*, is an internationally known film company, and Hayao Miyazaki is one of the most prominent filmmakers in Japan (Kawakami & Sunada, 2014). This fame has allowed *Spirited Away* to attract a wide audience not only in Japan, but globally. Despite its very specific attachment to Japanese culture and history – or, perhaps, *because* of these attachments – the film has been able to appeal to various audiences across time and space, specifically in the world of anime fandom.

Japanese anime was initially very hard to come by in the West. It was not until the 1980s when anime became prevalent in American society and attracted fan groups, which started springing up all over the country, mainly among men on college campuses. The Miyazaki

Mailing List (MML) is an international group of fans devoted to all things Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli. MML is one of the oldest and diverse groups of Internet anime fans, which began in 1991 at Brown University by Steven Feldman (Napier, 2006b). Fans encompass a wide range of ages, represent numerous countries, from Australia to Belorussia, and have a fair number of female participants. According to one fan, Mike A., his fascination with Miyazaki stems from the filmmaker's ability to intertwine "social interaction, historical context, responsibility, and coordination within a society" (Napier, 2006b, pg. 47). While some fans may join MML because of Miyazaki's stories, others are drawn to the food. Within MML and anime fandom more broadly, an interesting movement is occurring in which people are recreating the foods found in *Spirited Away* and other Miyazaki films. The food recreations are then posted online, mainly via Instagram, creating a cross-cultural link.

A large part of this link is that fan subcultures also allow for community. Specifically, MML allows people of diverse backgrounds to form bonds around common interests like Japanese animation. A 38-year-old tech support worker and member of MML shared her opinion on why she likes fan subcultures:

Fan subcultures provide the sense of belonging that used to be common among most American communities and families prior to the 1980s. Today... parents are too busy working and building careers to devote significant time for family building and family life... Fan subcultures help to provide a space for community where people can come and be accepted for who they are. In a society as fragmented as America has become, fan subcultures can provide an oasis for the weary soul (Napier, 2006, pg. 47).

While I primarily explore Japanese culture in this thesis, the impact of Japanese anime and *Spirited Away* within the American market over the past 40 years is impressive. My hope is for future research on Miyazaki to extend beyond Japan and allow for exploration of other

avenues, like on contemporary Western pop culture and relationships between the U.S. and Japan more fully.

Research Approach

In this thesis, it is my challenge to draw upon existing scholarship while also exploring uncharted territory. To do this, I have utilized primary and secondary sources to analyze *Spirited Away* using a film theorist approach. I used this approach because the food production and consumption in *Spirited Away* plays an “operable role in the development of character, structure, and theme” (Keller, 2006, pg. 1). The foods Miyazaki has chosen can represent highly suggestive cultural categories, like race, gender, history, spirituality and nationality, as well as more subjective conditions, like obsession, love, greed, and rage. I seek to explore these abstract links between food and emotions, as well look at Miyazaki’s own interpretation of the film based on interviews he has done. My sources vary from academic journals and historical documents to interviews, newspaper articles, and blog posts. The varied source material showcases the multiple ways that commentators have written about *Spirited Away*, both in academic and popular media.

In previous work during the spring of 2017, my main objective was to study the politics and aesthetics of food production and consumption across a variety of East Asian and American societies and political-economic contexts. I “consumed” classics of the food film genre such as *Tampopo*, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, *Big Night*, and *Julie and Julia*. In addition, I analyzed the politics of gender, race, identity, and social status in film, asking what cooking, eating, consuming, nourishing, or mass-producing means to globalized economies in the U.S. and Japan. Upon

completion, I not only had a rich literature review but also a better understanding of food and film as a mode of communication and analysis. This previous work ultimately made me better equipped to analyze food and film in East Asia and the U.S., and I utilize the skills I acquired throughout this thesis.

Methods

My methods include a filmic analysis of *Spirited Away*, which allows me to examine the food in both a descriptive and valuative way. I first looked closely at the film's content, including Miyazaki's creative process and inspirations. Then, I analyzed the formal elements of the film, such as its visual style and allusions to food (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2016; Vande Berg, Wenner, & Gronbeck, 1998). While assessing the textual elements of *Spirited Away* allowed me to understand the film's content and setting, I wanted to go beyond a text-driven analysis. Thus, I also used a more valuative approach to assess the meaning behind these textual elements used in *Spirited Away*. To do so, I placed the film into a wider context, looking at when and how the movie was produced, released, and consumed. I looked briefly at the history of Studio Ghibli, as well as Japanese animation more broadly, in order to understand the context in which *Spirited Away* came to be.

In addition, one of the main tensions in *Spirited Away* is between tradition and modernity. To analyze this theme, I drew upon Japanese cultural history, particularly collectives related to nostalgia and ambiguity, as a tool to explore various themes and symbols in *Spirited Away*. I also pulled from my own experiences and knowledge as a Japanese American, who grew up in the Midwest but spent many summers as a child in Japan. While not a native

speaker, I have intensely studied the language in school and was raised in a multi-cultural household. Operating with one foot in both worlds functions both as an opportunity and a limitation when it comes to this particular thesis. I have insights and preconceptions that a native speaker would not, and my analysis surely has missed cultural details because I am not fluent and did not grow up in Japan. It is important for me to acknowledge any bias and subjectivity I may have had because of my intimate connection with the film and Japanese language and culture, in general.

Additionally, while the focus is on only one film, I looked at *Spirited Away's* relationship with other forms of food media and food performance through an analysis of discourses like national identity and social class. In particular, food is a powerful medium to discuss cultural hierarchies and power structures. Scenes with food preparation and consumption play an important role in marking class and religious differences. At the same time, “communities all over the world identify themselves not only based on *what* they eat but on *how different* what they eat is from what their neighbors consume” (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2016). Because questions of who belong and/or what it means to be Japanese are called into question throughout *Spirited Away*, food is an important site to explore. To begin my research, I start with a descriptive filmic analysis of *Spirited Away*.

Descriptive Filmic Analysis

Creative Process

In 2002, film critic Derek Elley wrote in his review for *Spirited Away* in *Variety* magazine: “It’s almost impossible to do justice in words either to the visual richness of the movie... or to

the character-filled storyline... Its look is frequently astounding, with a feel of traditional animation that humanizes the movie in a way pure digital animation never can" (Elley, 2002, para. 11). What allows *Spirited Away* and other Miyazaki films to stand apart as animations is that he personally draws thousands of frames by hand for each of his movies. This is a process that is nearly nonexistent in the U.S. due to the emergence of 3-D, computer-generated imagery (CGI), as seen in blockbuster films such as "Finding Nemo," "Toy Story," and "Shrek." According to Miyazaki, while 2-D, frame-by-frame drawing is more tedious, time-consuming, and often more labor-intensive, it is the traditional bedrock for all of his animations because it allows for more attention to detail (Ebert, 2012).

Although new CGI techniques can "render the food appetizing and realistic," frame-by-frame drawing creates food that is just as, if not more, aesthetically appealing (Lindenfeld & Parasecoli, 2017). The food in *Spirited Away* appears still steaming, soft, juicy, and tender, and, at times, even more delectable than the real thing. The sheer amount of food scenes and references in Miyazaki's work has created a unique pop cultural phenomenon where fans recreate the foods found in *Spirited Away* and other Miyazaki films. The creations are often posted to social media, like Instagram, with the hashtag, #ghiblifood (Sorbe, 2017). Two Instagrammers, @en93kitchen and @01ghibli23 have accounts solely dedicated to Studio Ghibli food recreations. Examples include *anpan* from *Spirited Away*, bacon and eggs from *Howl's Moving Castle*, and ramen from *Ponyo* (*Ibid.*). Additionally, the Ghibli Museum created an exhibit in May 2017 called "Delicious! Animating Memorable Meals," or *Taberu wo Kaku*. The exhibit is separated into two parts: one on eating and one on cooking, detailing the many ways Studio Ghibli creators like Miyazaki have brought their foods to life (Ashcraft, 2017). The

following behind Miyazaki's food is a testament not only to his skills as an animator but also as a storyteller. As we see in the next segment, the use of food and eating play an important role in understanding both his characters and their growth.

Additionally, the production method for *Spirited Away* follows Miyazaki's normal *modus operandi*, where the story develops and unfolds alongside the creation of his storyboards (Cavallaro, 2006). According to Miyazaki, by not having the story fully finished at the beginning of production, the film is able to "make itself" and he has "no choice but to follow" (*Ibid.*, pg. 134). Miyazaki also tries to incorporate everything his staff makes into the final production. Even when a foreground is created that does not quite fit with one of his backgrounds, Miyazaki tries to find a use for it rather than waste it. Thus, it is not just food Japanese citizens are taught not to waste, but rather a sentiment intended to be carried out in everyday life. Mindfulness, intent, and conscientiousness: three concepts that I argue are woven throughout *Spirited Away's* narrative, as well. But first, we look at the inspiration behind the film, which is multi-faceted and collaborative, just like Miyazaki's creative process.

Inspirations

In planning for what would eventually become *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki had originally intended to produce a straightforward animated adaptation of Sachiko Kashiwaba's *Kirino Mukouno Fushigina Machi (The Mysterious Town Behind the Fog, 1995)*. The story follows a young girl who wanders into a parallel universe that is populated with chaotic, marvelous characters. However, the project ended up not being a straightforward account, but rather pulled from a hodgepodge of other stories, images, and memories. Some of the most

prominent influences found sketched in Miyazaki's notebooks and sketchbooks were Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883), and Homer's *Odyssey*. All three works deal with ideas of metamorphoses and have surreal characters driven by both good and evil (Cavallaro, 2006). Additionally, Miyazaki based Chihiro largely off of one of his best friends' 10-year old daughter, whom he had stayed with during a customary summer retreat up in the mountains in Shinshu.

After spending time with the girl, who was happy and high-spirited most of the retreat, Miyazaki wondered how and if she would be able to maintain that same disposition as she grew up. Thus, using her as a muse, Miyazaki set out to create a film "for the people who used to be 10-years old, and the people who are going to be 10-years old" (Cavallaro, 2006, pg. 134). This statement, which Miyazaki penned for the film's epigraph, encapsulates much of Miyazaki's approach to the worlds of children and adults, which can seem at times both incompatible yet complementary. Indeed, the people "who are going to be 10-years old" may be children who are quickly approaching that age, and those "who used to be 10-years old" may be adults who are willing to revisit and reimagine their own childhoods through the film's narrative. The dichotomy between children and adults is only one oppositional category explored throughout *Spirited Away*. Miyazaki also challenges ideas about tradition vs. modern, Japan vs. the West, and good vs. evil.

In addition, many of the settings portrayed in *Spirited Away* are based on real-life locations close to Miyazaki's heart. For instance, the streets, the shop fronts, and the decorations and signs that characterize the restaurant district that tempts Chihiro's parents have architectural and stylistic features of actual venues from Jiufen, Taiwan, while the

bathhouse kitchens are based on existing cooking areas found in modern Tokyo restaurants. Moreover, a large proportion of the town is based on the Edo-Tokyo Architectural Park, which is located near Studio Ghibli in Hana-Koganei, Tokyo, Japan (Cavallaro, 2006). The park, which is an open-air exhibition, uniquely illustrates the past of Tokyo (known as Edo until 1869) through a variety of replicated buildings and architectural styles. One of the most remarkable buildings found in the park is a bathhouse, which parallels the one represented in *Spirited Away*. According to Pixar director John Lasseter, the park played an important role for Miyazaki because of its attentiveness to traditional architecture. Whenever Miyazaki would visit, he would be quietly reminded of a life, of buildings, of streets, and of traditions forgotten. Throughout *Spirited Away*, similar to Miyazaki's unique creative process, he is able to recapture a sense of tradition and belonging, as well as modernity, through imaginative interventions and visuals.

Visuals

Indeed, *Spirited Away* is rich with visual allusions that nod to both Japanese traditionalism and modernism. For example, some of these traditional moments are found within the masked *Kasuga* spirits, which are inspired by spiritual Shinto rituals often performed at native Japanese shrines. Among them are *Oshira-Sama* (the "Spirit of *Daikon* Radish"), *Kawa no Kami* (the "River Spirit"), *Okusare-Sama* (the "Stink Spirit"), and *Ushioni* ("Antlered Spirits" or "Cow Goblins"). Further visual allusions to Shintoism include an old *torii*, or a Japanese gate often found at the entrance to a Shinto shrine, which is leaned up against the large tree near the entrance of the tunnel at the beginning of the film. Additionally, in that same scene, a small

stone statue is seen near the roadside right before the tunnel. The statue is making a grimacing face and appears to be closely modeled off *Douso-jin*, a Shinto deity that protects travelers (Wright & Clode, 2005). Some argue the stone statue acts as a precursor for the adventure and time traveling the Ogino family is about to experience. Once inside the tunnel, the open space also communicates a quasi-religious feel, visually. Aside from a few unoccupied benches, the empty room partly mimics a typical waiting area found at a train station. At the same time, the stained-glass windows, high ceilings, pillars, and the remnants of a votive candle also make it feel like an old place of worship (Cavallaro, 2006).

Other allusions to Japanese traditionalism are further found through food. For instance, Chihiro's friend Haku gives her a Japanese rice ball, or *onigiri*, when she is feeling sick. Historically, rice balls were created during the Heian period, when Tokyo was still known as Edo. Processed seaweed became accessible to common people, and people started wrapping it around rice balls (Kurihara, 2015). It quickly became known as the traveler's food because of its innovative and simplistic design. Another food in the film with a longstanding history in Japan is *ishi-yaki-imo*, or stone-roasted Japanese sweet potatoes. Sweet potatoes entered Japan sometime in the 16th century and became popular after saving many people dying of famine in the Kanto region after rice-crop failures in the mid-18th century (Itoh, 2011). Today, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines dedicated to the humble tuber are scattered around the Kanto area. One other nostalgic food alluded to in *Spirited Away* is *konpeito*, or a traditional Japanese sugar candy. The technique for producing the candy was first introduced by a Portuguese missionary, Luis Frois, in 1569. Frois gifted a glass bottle of the candies to Oda Nobunaga, the feudal lord of Japan at the time. Today, *konpeito* is still being made in Japan and is even the traditional thank-

you-for-coming gift, given by the Imperial House of Japan (Crate, 2015). Together, these nostalgic and iconic food visuals remind many viewers of a more traditional Japanese diet, as well as a specific time in history.

In the same realm, *Spirited Away* also evinces visual allusions to a more contemporary, post-WWII Japan. For instance, the character Yubaba, who is the proprietor of the bathhouse and who turns Chihiro's parents into pigs, wears a Western dress while her workers wear traditional Japanese uniforms. Additionally, Yubaba's living space is styled with Western décor: lavish carpets, lamps, and doors (Suzuki, 2009). The West similarly influences Chihiro's parents, as seen by their clothing and family car. Chihiro's father sports a classic polo shirt, while her mother wears khakis. The Ogino family also drives a car that has the Audi logo on the grille. Audis, which are a German brand, are known as luxury cars in Japan, because they have to be imported (The News Wheel, 2015). The fact that the steering wheel is on the left side, rather than on the right like most Japanese cars, indicates the vehicle is rare, expensive, and that the Ogino's are most likely wealthy.

Some of the food in the film also serves as an allusion to a more modern Japan. Legs of poultry, juicy steaks, English tea ceremonies, and chocolates in heart-shaped boxes all allude to Western or European influences. For instance, chocolates in heart-shaped boxes first appeared in Britain in 1861. The boxes were marketed as places to save mementos, like love letters, from Valentine's Day (Henderson, 2015). However, it took over 90 years for Valentine's Day to make its way to Japan – not appearing until the late 1950s after Japan's economy started picking up after the economic recession after World War II (Himmer, 2015). Another food that came into full swing after the war was red meat, which is seen in the scene when the *Kaonashi* is gorging

itself throughout the bathhouse. The Japanese have been eating red meat in small quantities since 1872, after emperor Meiji was seen publicly eating meat for the first time. During wartime, however, red meat became synonymous with progress, modernity, and health. After the Japanese observed war victors eating hamburgers, steaks, and bacon, there was a powerful boost in meat consumption in Japan due to a desire to emulate those characteristics (Zaraska, 2016).

One other main visual influence in *Spirited Away* comes from Taiwan, which has an interesting relationship with Japan. For about five decades until the end of WWII, Taiwan was Japanese soil. Today, on the streets of Taipei and Tainan, there is still evidence of Japan's influence: bilingual storefronts written in both Mandarin and Japanese exist, and a number of restaurants advertise *nisshiki* (or Japanese style) dishes (Shoji, 2017). Due to this long-standing relationship, it is not surprising Taiwanese architecture, landscapes, and foods found their way into *Spirited Away*. For instance, the 100-year-old Amei tea house in Jiufen, Taiwan has been described by some fans as a "carbon copy" of the film's bathhouse, due its signature rows of red lanterns and soft glowing lights in its windows (Goldberg, 2017).³ Additionally, traditional Taiwanese meat dumplings, or *ba wan*, are speculated to be what Chihiro's father is eating at the beginning of the parents' feast. The jiggly, gummy-coated dumpling is filled with meat, bamboo shoots, and mushrooms and has a similar history to the Japanese sweet potato. It is believed *ba wan* was invented during a flood in Beidou, rationed out to those displaced by the disaster. Since then, *ba wan* has spread to various regions in Taiwan and become known as a

³ It is important to note, as I mentioned before, others speculate the bathhouse is based on a bathhouse in the Edo-Tokyo Architectural Park. While Miyazaki could have pulled inspiration from both (or neither), both are just theories.

national snack food delicacy (Erway & Lee, 2015). Other Taiwanese foods seen throughout *Spirited Away* include sausages and sweet and salty rice cakes filled with yam or red beans.

As one can see, the visual allusions I have touched on – be it religious symbols, architectural structures, material items, or food – are vast and complicated in *Spirited Away*. These are also just a handful of the allusions found throughout the film; many more exist but it was not within the scope of this thesis to unpack them all. The allusions I explored tend to fit somewhere between the poles of *furusato* (native place) and *kokusaika* (internationalism), or, alternatively, “traditionalism” and “modernism.” For instance, while the bathhouse, spirits, and traditional Japanese foods develop a nostalgic engagement with the past, the Western and Taiwanese visuals employ a nod to the effects of “modernization,” which includes a more globalized food culture. As Susan Napier writes, the mix of visual allusions indicate both a desire to “encounter the unexpected, the peripheral unknown, even the frightening ... a desire that reveals itself under the controlled and predictable conditions of everyday life under consumer capitalism,” and to “return to a stable point of origin, to discover an authentically Japanese Japan that is disappearing yet still present ” (Napier, 2006, pg. 292). In order to understand this complicated dichotomy and the role of food and eating more fully, I continue with a valuative analysis that dissects several major food scenes in the film.

Valuative Analysis

Pigs/Parents Scene vs. Haku/Chihiro Scenes

To start, I return to the scene where Chihiro’s parents are transformed into pigs. Chihiro finds them being whipped by the kitchen staff, who are yelling at them for eating the food,

which is largely from Taiwan or other parts of the globe and intended for the gods. Her father falls heavily to the ground with a beastly scream, which shocks and frightens her. She decides to run away from the restaurant, calling out for her parents out of desperation but hearing no response. She makes her way to the river and, huddling alone, tells herself she must be dreaming. She repeats the words “go away” and “disappear,” trying to wake-up in a different place (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 2001). But instead, her own body begins to respond to the mantra and starts to fade away. Haku, the boy who previously warned her to leave before sunset, finds her and tells her she must eat something from the spirit world, as she will otherwise turn transparent. He hands her a magical berry-like food and assures her it will not turn her into a pig. Immediately after taking a bite, Chihiro’s physical form is restored. Throughout the film, food becomes an augment for Haku and Chihiro’s relationship. In another scene, Haku gifts Chihiro another food, a magical *onigiri*, after he notices Chihiro looks worn out. After just one bite, she regains her strength and mental clarity. These scenes, which I refer to as the pigs/parents scene and the Haku/Chihiro scenes, highlight food’s enormous power and force as either good or evil.

For instance, in the pigs/parents scene, the parent’s excessive consumption leads to their radical and undesired transformation. In the Haku/Chihiro scenes, however, food acts as a source of healing.⁴ Thus, I argue, it is not food itself that is evil, but rather the way in which the characters consume them, and seemingly the type of foods in these scenes, that is important.

⁴ While this thesis cannot discuss every Haku/Chihiro scene, it is important to note how their relationship changes throughout *Spirited Away*, specifically who takes on the role of caretaker and caregiver. While Haku heals Chihiro twice at the beginning of the film, Chihiro heals Haku at the end after he is transformed into a dragon. She force-feeds him an emetic herbal ball that forces him to vomit, re-transform, and finally heal. This is the only scene we see Haku eating, marking its significance.

In the pigs/parents scene, the parents resolutely help themselves to the glittering food after being seduced by the smells and appearances of it. Chihiro, on the other hand, is afraid of not asking beforehand and angering the staff by eating without permission. So, she refuses to eat, but her father assures her that he has cash and credit cards, in case someone finds them and asks for payment. In the world Chihiro's parents normally inhabit, money is the answer and solution to their problems, which is a mindset representative of a more "western" capitalistic thinking (Sunnerstam, 2013, pg. 18). As alluded through their clothing and car, the Ogino's presumably have a lot of money, too. However, in the spirit world, money cannot save the parents from being transformed into pigs, an animal associated with gluttony (*Ibid.*).⁵ Rather, a whole different system of value and exchange goes on in the spirit world, as demonstrated by Yubaba and her identical sister Zeniba. Unlike Yubaba's lavishly decorated apartment, Zeniba lives a simple life in a small home. She does not rely on her magic for tasks she can do by herself, while Yubaba uses hers at the bathhouse in order to be successful and profitable. According to Zeniba, this reliance makes her sister greedy, similar to Chihiro's parent's reliance on money. While both sisters cause some trouble and chaos throughout the film, Zeniba eventually reveals herself as a kindhearted and helpful woman, much like Chihiro at the end of the film (Suzuki, 2009). Thus, in the spirit world, living simply and conscientiously is more valuable than money or power, like in the world of Chihiro's parents.

Contrastingly, in the Haku/Chihiro scenes, Chihiro's food is kindly gifted to her by Haku. In the 1st scene, Haku finds her as she is starting to turn transparent and beginning to lose hope of saving her parents. The berry-like food given to her, though, revitalizes her and gives her

⁵ Later in the film, we see a whole barn full of pigs, which are seemingly other visitors from the outside that were transformed for similar gluttonous behaviors.

strength not only physically but also mentally to navigate the spirit world. The berry is benign: small, red, and simplistically drawn, as opposed to Chihiro's parents food which is lavishly animated, piled high, and shimmering in the light. I believe the striking contrast between the two foods is there to highlight how, while the grand and extravagant might be more tempting to characters (or even to viewers upon first glance), the most nourishing foods in the film are the most simple or rustic and should not be overlooked. In the 2nd scene, Chihiro is now a bathhouse attendant, as evident through her work uniform/traditional clothing, and is now known as Sen. Yubaba gives workers new names and forces them to forget their old identities. In the scene, Sen is stumped over next to a flower bush, crying and afraid, and Haku comes and squats down next to her. He puts one hand on her back, as an act of comfort, and presents an *onigiri* he has made for her with the other. Like the berry, the simple rice ball enriches her body and comforts her spirit in a way the more lavish foods never could. The gifting of the food alludes once again not only to Haku's kind heart but also to the intimate bond forming between him and Chihiro/Sen. A bond that cannot be bought or greedily consumed but rather must be carefully and conscientiously created. In the next scene between the *Kaonashi* and Chihiro, we see similar themes, like gluttony, selfishness, and the power of food.

The Kaonashi/Chihiro

The final scene I discuss occurs between the *Kaonashi* and Chihiro. The *Kaonashi* is an undefined mask-wearing silhouette that is passive, slender, voiceless, self-controlled, and generous at the beginning of film. The *Kaonashi* often offers items to the bathhouse workers, like soap tags, gold, and food. Most workers greedily accept the offerings, except Chihiro who

always rejects them. Chihiro's rejection distresses the *Kaonashi*, who, gradually, transforms into a frog-like monster with an insatiable appetite. The spirit begins consuming everything in sight from traditional Japanese foods, like *ishi-yaki-imo*, to Western and Taiwanese-style dishes, like whole hogs and *ba wan*, to even some bathhouse workers. By the end of the film, the *Kaonashi* appears active, plump, vocal (after acquiring a voice), and demanding – the exact opposite of what it once was (Hansen, 2016). The spirit, who is out of control and intending on consuming Chihiro, is finally tamed after being given an emetic herbal ball by Chihiro. The ball causes the *Kaonashi* to violently puke. With each heave, it once more becomes slender, voiceless, and self-controlled (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 2001). The *Kaonashi's* transformation appears to represent themes of lost identity and malaise for contemporary Japan, as more Western values, like greed and over-consumption, become adopted. The spirit can only recover after it consumes the herbal ball from Chihiro, which symbolizes more traditional values, like selflessness and companionship.

Similar to the previous scenes between Chihiro's parents and Haku, food acts as a powerful and transformative tool. However, the food consumed by the *Kaonashi* is wide and varied, causing me to argue, by pulling on food theory by Elspeth Probyn, it is not the type of food that matters but rather the act of eating that does. In *Carnal Appetites: Foodsexidentities*, Probyn argues that what we eat is connected with who we are. "As we ingest, we mutate, we expand and contract, we change – sometimes subtly, sometimes violently" (Probyn, 2000, pg. 18). In the case of the *Kaonashi*, similar to the pigs/parents scene, it greedily and excessively consumes food without thinking of the consequences. Its body becomes a vehicle filled with anxieties, ecstasies, and discomforts.

Part of this stems from the *Kaonashi's* partial facelessness, which similar to Chihiro/Sen, encapsulates a loss of identity. The spirit wears a mask with eyes and a mouth painted on, but the features appear as black, expressionless holes. Later on, it is revealed that the *Kaonashi* has an actual mouth that is much larger than the one painted on its mask. The spirit uses food to try to alleviate this unique struggle with identity but to no avail. It is only after Chihiro gives the spirit the medicinal ball that it gains a sense of belonging and companionship, which allows it to assuage its never-ending hunger for good (Cavallaro, 2006). Within the politics of feeding, it is clear that food and eating is “as much marked by pleasure as it is power; in fact, it gestures to the pleasure of control, the desire revealed in constraint” (Probyn, 2000, pg. 18). Only after the *Kaonashi* is in control of its bodies does it find true pleasure and happiness.

While the three scenes described above portray a bizarre and fantastical spirit world, I argue it still has connections to the real world. Anxieties, ecstasies, and discomforts are similarly felt within modern Japanese society, where the consumption of Western foods also means the consumption of Western values. And just as the *Kaonashi* changes within the film, Japan’s foodscape expands and contracts – both slight and fierce, at times. While I have already discussed concrete spaces that have inspired the film, I have not placed the film within a larger historical context. Thus, I believe in order to understand the significance of the above scenes on Japanese identity, food culture, and the increasing globalized world, I must briefly discuss two events, the Bubble Era and the economic recession, which have impacted *Spirited Away's* narrative.

Analysis

According to a Studio Ghibli employee, the pigs/parents transformation scene, was supposed to reflect the nature of greed in the real world (Gold-Bourn, 2017). Specifically, to represent the greed that led up to the Japanese economic recession, which occurred from the 1990s until the early 2000s. Prior to the crash from roughly 1985 to 1990, Japan faced a time not only of prosperity but also of waste, corruption, and extravagance (Johnston, 2009). This period of time is often referred to as the Bubble Era, and the depreciation of the dollar and lowered interest rates from the Bank of Japan allowed many Japanese to live more extravagantly. Stories of housewives in Nara sipping \$500 cups of coffee dusted with gold and businessmen spending tens of thousands of dollars on flashy dinners and in nightclubs during this time are abundant (*Ibid.*). After the crash in the 1990s, however, Japan suffered an economic malaise that stunted wages, lowered stock prices, and ultimately destabilized the work and the family unit (Tabuchi, 2009).

The idea of regular lifetime employment was replaced by 'irregular' (temporary, contract) or part-time work, drastically changing the urban labor force. Because young workers were more likely to have non-regular jobs, nicknames like "the NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training)," "the freeters (free or permanent part-timers)," and "parasite single" were used to identify them (Galbraith, 2011). Thus, there was a push throughout the decade-long economic recession for Japan to rebuild and to transform, causing Tokyo to become one of the most "capital-saturated urban centers in the world" by the early 2000s. After an unprecedented amount of money went into advertising, design, and image production, Japan fell back into another recession in 2008 (Galbraith, 2011). It rebounded in 2010 when GDP

increased by 3% but fell off briefly after Japan's 2011 earthquake and nuclear power disaster (Amadeo, 2016). Today Japan's economy is still vulnerable and recovering after the initial crash after the Bubble Era.

As a result, this has led many Japanese to remember the Bubble Era with mixed views: either "nostalgically by those who remember when they had money to burn" or "with embarrassment by those who reflected on the attitudes and policies, or lack thereof, that led to it" or "with anger by those who see the period as the moment in Japan's history when the country abandoned its traditional moral, social, cultural values and became greedy in an allegedly Western or American sense" (Johnston, 2009, para. 23). The latter two appear to be Miyazaki's take and the foods chosen in the pigs/parents scene, the Haku/Chihiro scenes, and the *Kaonashi*/Chihiro scene, help further this idea. For starters, the sheer amount of food consumed within the film appears reminiscent to the Bubble era, when values of greed and corruption prevailed. Additionally, a large majority of the foods in the pigs/parents scene allude to a more militaristic Japan. For instance, the parents consume the Taiwanese *ba wan*, which serves as a reminder to when Taiwan was under Japanese rule. Whereas the Western foods eaten, like red meat, remind viewers of the power and success Japan wanted to emulate after WWII. The food items, when placed alongside themes of gluttony and selfishness, help further the idea of Japan abandoning its traditional way.

Additionally, during the Haku/Chihiro scenes, Haku gives Chihiro the magical berry and *onigiri*, which both help restore her health (Studio Ghibli & Miyazaki, 2001). As discussed above, *onigiri* has been a part of Japanese history for centuries and alludes to a more classical moment in Japan's history where traditional values were at the forefront. The rice ball has an emotional

magic attached to it that is able to humanize (or re-humanize) not only Miyazaki's characters but also his audience members. For many Japanese viewers, the appearance of the *onigiri* brings many to tears, because it serves as a reminder of commensality and human interdependence. According to Miyazaki, the *onigiri* is essential, because it is a food "sculpted by the hands of someone you know and whose tireless efforts give you life" (Whitelaw, 2006, pg. 134). Upon first glance, while it appears traditional foods, like *onigiri*, cause good while more globalized ones, like *ba wan*, cause evil, I argue this binary analysis is far too simplistic.

Indeed, although the delineation of good vs. evil and tradition vs. modern foods appear simple and obvious in *Spirited Away*, I argue it is much more complicated. Part of this complication is due to Lawrence Grossberg's theory of rhizomes. He uses rhizomes, which are a plant with a branching root system that spreads both horizontally and laterally, to think about food. In this way, any food or moment of consumption is an assemblage: "bits of past and present practice, openings, attachments to part of the social, closings and aversions to other parts" (Probyn, 2000, pg. 18). Thinking rhizomatically, we see how each food scene in *Spirited Away* is a tangle of connections and relations, blurring any neat distinctions or categories between traditionalism and modernism. For instance, even in the scenes between Haku/Chihiro, the *onigiri* is presented in the film as a kinder, gentler food. However, I argue it is not free of scrutiny when we place it in a broader context and recognize it has multiple entryways into Japan's history and culture.

In modern Japan, the culturally recognizable rice ball is also one of the most commercially mass-produced packaged foods. Japan's two largest convenience store chains, 7-Eleven Japan and Lawson, have been in the forefront of Japan's industrial food system and

packaged *onigiri* (Whitelaw, 2006). The *onigiri* in *Spirited Away*, according to Miyazaki, is supposed to be portrayed as handcrafted, rather than commercially made, for a reason. It evokes a memory for many Japanese viewers of a shared cultural moment and time in Japanese history - a time before the economic recession and the Bubble era. Indeed, for many Japanese, myself included, the *onigiri* is seen as a “comfort food,” one that reflects the skills and hands of its creator (which were traditionally usually women). Some scientists have even gone so far as to argue that naturally occurring salts and oils from a woman’s palms subtly alter the flavor of the rice, thus giving homemade *onigiri* a distinct flavor that is traceable only to its creator (Whitelaw, 2006).

Over time, however, the *onigiri* image has evolved in contemporary Japan from that of a traditional family food to one that is purchased outside the home, in stores and markets. Indeed, during my most recent trip to Japan during the summer of 2015, every convenience store I frequented sold pre-packaged *onigiri*. This change occurred in the late 1960s after the American convenience store franchise model was introduced to Japan. The *onigiri* became a key product in “domesticating the foreign retail form for the Japanese palate” because of its familiarity and convenience (*Ibid.*, pg.131). While today the *onigiri* can be found in all of Japan’s major convenience stores, questions of health, quality, safety, and the impact of technology and commercialism are called into question. Thus, if Haku had given Chihiro a 7-Eleven *onigiri*, rather than a homemade one, the meaning of the scene would have been drastically different because it would have emulated a more modern and commercialized Japan. A Japan that Chihiro’s parents, and audience members, may occupy and thrive in but not one that Haku and the spirits want to celebrate. Therefore, I argue it is not about the foods having essential

meanings but rather about the shifting significance they take on in different circumstances. This idea is further seen in the *Kaonashi/Chihiro* scene.

During the *Kaonashi/Chihiro* scene, the spirit consumes large amounts of food from all over the world, including traditional Japanese foods. The food is lavishly plated and drawn: whole pigs heads and fish bigger than the size of the bathhouse workers and piles of *ba wan*, white rice, and *ishi-yaki-imo* overflowing their bowls. In comparison, the medicinal ball given to heal the *Kaonashi* is simplistically drawn, much like the berry Chihiro consumes at the beginning of the film. The ball is a greenish grey color and the size of a golf ball. Its mud-like resemblance makes it far less appealing and appetizing for viewers to watch or to recreate later on Instagram. However, the ball is what ultimately heals the *Kaonashi*, rather than the traditional Japanese foods like the *onigiri* for Chihiro. In fact, the Japanese foods actually physically harm the *Kaonashi*, who becomes more and more bloated with each bite. In the *Kaonashi/Chihiro* scene, the meaning attached to traditional Japanese foods does not matter because of how the *Kaonashi* consumes them. The spirit lacks mindfulness and just keeps eating. In this scene, the act of eating is far more important than the place or history attached to the foods themselves. The essential meanings of the foods are altered and devalued based more on the attention with which one eats instead. In the spirit world, it seems we are *how* we eat rather than what we eat.

Concluding Discussion

In conclusion, the aim I set out for this thesis was to use a food film theorist lens to analyze food and eating in *Spirited Away*. Although *Spirited Away* is (nearly) void of humans, it

is not without difficult power relations, materialistic greed, and complicated relationships with food. For this thesis, I chose to use food to understand these complicated issues, because images of eating, purging, and cleansing recur throughout the film. Some scenes are more outrageous (like the *Kaonashi* swelling into a ravenous monster or Chihiro's parents turning into pigs), while others are quieter (like when Chihiro is given a rice-ball to restore her health). I also chose to not only discuss but also complicate some of the dichotomies found in the film, such as good vs. evil, Japan vs. the West, and *furusato*, or traditionalism, vs. *kokusaika*, or modernism. Upon first glance, I thought scenes with more nostalgic, traditional Japanese foods might heal characters, while scenes with more globalized foods might cause more chaos. However, after dissecting three major food scenes more thoroughly, it is clear the dichotomies are more complicated.

Part of this complication comes from the fact that *Spirited Away* exists in a world that is both timeless and placeless, making it difficult to do any straightforward historical analysis. Additionally, in some scenes, visual allusions to traditional Japanese foods, like the *onigiri*, cause good, while in others, like with *ishi-yaki-imo* and the *Kaonashi*, the foods cause pain. A better tool for analysis, for me, then was looking at the act of eating rather than placing foods in binary categories. Indeed, characters with haphazard ways of eating, like the *Kaonashi* or Chihiro's parents, were punished and radically transformed, regardless of the type of food they consumed. Additionally, the iconic *onigiri* that Chihiro is healed by is also one of the most mass produced foods in modern Japan. Thus, foods take on different values depending on their circumstances, making it nearly impossible to analyze them based on their essential meanings.

Throughout this thesis, I have shown how food is a powerful site for studying the complicated narrative and characters found throughout *Spirited Away*. Also, by drawing upon Japanese cultural studies, media studies, and contemporary pop culture, I have been able to partially fill a gap in existing scholarly research. However, because of the vast amount of visual allusions found throughout the film, my analysis only makes a small dent in what else can be explored. Future avenues of research I see include topics, such as food's relationships with nature and religion, food as medicine, and the crossover between Japanese and Western pop culture. My hope for the future is for more people to become *spirited away*, just as I was, into Miyazaki's world.

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