Opinion-Perspective Article

Responding to Capitalism: Consumerism, Identity, and Environment in *Spirited Away*

Fangzhou Zhai

Melbourne Grammar School, 355 St Kilda Road, Melbourne VIC 3004, Australia

ABSTRACT

Released during Japan's prolonged post-bubble economic stagnation, *Spirited Away* (2001) reflects widespread social anxieties surrounding consumerism, labor uncertainty, environmental degradation, and the erosion of traditional values in late-capitalist Japan. This paper examines *Spirited Away* as a cinematic critique of capitalist modernity in Japan, focusing on consumerism, identity erosion, hierarchical labor, and environmental pollution. Drawing on Adrian Ivakhiv's *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, the analysis applies the anthropomorphic, geomorphic, and animamorphic dimensions to explore how cinematic spaces, characters, and spiritual beings within the film actively produce meaning rather than merely telling a story. Situating the film within Japan's postwar economic growth, bubble-era excess, and Shinto belief, the paper argues that Miyazaki portrays capitalism as an ecological system that reshapes human behaviour, undermines spiritual values, and disrupts the balance between humans and the environment. Through close analysis of key figures including Chihiro, Yubaba, No-Face, bathhouse workers, and the polluted river spirit, the paper demonstrates how consumerism dehumanizes subjects, hierarchy normalizes exploitation, and environmental degradation emerges as a lived, embodied consequence of industrial development. Ultimately, *Spirited Away* proposes an alternative ethical vision grounded in Shinto principles of purification, relational identity, restraint, and collective responsibility, offering a critique of capitalism that is moral, ecological, and cultural instead of purely economic.

Keywords: *Spirited Away*; Capitalism; Shinto; Bubble Economy; Japan

INTRODUCTION

Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) has been celebrated as a fantasy film for children, yet a growing body of scholarship recognizes it as a sophisticated critique of modern Japanese society under capitalism. Set in a liminal spirit world dominated by a commercial bathhouse, the film exposes the consequences of consumerism, the erosion of personal identity, rigid working hierarchy, and environmental pollution. Through its depiction of excessive consumption, exploitative labor systems, and polluted landscapes, the film reflects anxieties surrounding Japan's modern economic development and the cultural disorientation produced by capitalist modernity (1, 2).

Hayao Miyazaki is one of Japan's most influential animators, screenwriters, manga artists, and filmmakers, best known as the co-founder and leading director of Studio Ghibli. His works consistently address the tension between materialism and spirituality, industrial modernity and the natural

Corresponding author: Fangzhou Zhai, E-mail: ericzhai86@gmail.com.

Accepted March 23, 2026
https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.42159168

environment, greed and moral restraint. Miyazaki's worldview is deeply informed by Shinto, which offers essential cultural and spiritual context for interpreting his work (3, 4). Shinto understands humans, nature, and kami as part of a shared spiritual space (3). In Shinto belief, spiritual pollution arises from imbalance, excess, or contact with death and blood, but also from environmental contamination, while ritual purification restores harmony (3, 5). Drawing on Shinto, Miyazaki's films portray morally complex spirits and evoke a nostalgic reflection on humanity's former harmony with nature (4). One of Miyazaki's cinematic explorations of environmental issues is *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). Drawing on real-world tragedies, such as the Chisso Corporation's mercury poisoning that claimed over 900 lives, the film serves as both a reflection on human-caused ecological disasters and a call for environmental responsibility (6). Shinto's emphasis on harmony with nature and its concern with purification from spiritual pollution serve as a framework for portraying humans' moral responsibilities to restore the balance between nature and society (4). Similarly, in *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki explores these ideas by presenting the bathhouse as a site where purification rituals have been corrupted. The suffering of polluted river spirits, the commodification of labor, and the loss of personal names all signify a chasm between spiritual values and economic pursuits in contemporary Japan (5, 7).

Previous scholars have explored these themes from multiple perspectives. Ayumi S. interprets the bathhouse as a capitalist space shaped by Western influence, arguing that characters such as Yubaba embody exploitative capitalist values that disrupt traditional relationships between humans, nature, and the spiritual world (8). Jaich similarly sees the bathhouse as a microcosm of capitalist society, emphasizing how greed, hierarchy, and environmental degradation mirror Japan's postwar economic expansion and the collapse of the bubble economy (9). Other scholars, such as Mandal and Quirk, have further connected the film's critique of materialism to ecological damage and the marginalization of Shinto values in contemporary Japan (5, 7). Wright argues that the director constructs a "cinematic animism" in which forests, spirits, and even non-living beings are inhabited by kami, reflecting Shinto values in the sacredness of nature (4). This worldview allows Miyazaki to critique the destructive effects of industrialization and modernity, as seen in his films like *Princess Mononoke*, where environmental disruption results from human arrogance and technological expansion (4).

Adopting Adrian Ivakhiv's *Ecologies of the Moving Image* as its theoretical framework, this paper argues that *Spirited Away* is not only a story about personal growth or a critique of capitalism, but it also imagines and proposes ethical ways to relate human and non-human life. Ivakhiv argues that films do not simply tell stories; they organize relationships between humans, environments, non-human subjects, and even spiritual beings, and generate meaning. Ivakhiv proposes four interrelated dimensions: the anthropomorphic, the geomorphic, the biomorphic, and the animamorphic. The anthropomorphic dimension focuses on human values and social systems. The geomorphic dimension highlights landscape, space, and environment. The biomorphic dimension concentrates on non-human life, while the animamorphic dimension is related to spiritual elements (10). Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* aligns closely with Ivakhiv's theory. However, this theory also exposes one of its key limitations when analyzing Miyazaki's films. Particularly, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between the biomorphic and animamorphic dimensions, as Shinto animism resists a strict separation between biological life and spiritual presence. Within the film, rivers become kami, spirits possess physical bodies, and non-human entities express emotion, agency, and suffering in ways that undermine categorical boundaries. This ambiguity reflects a Shinto worldview in which nature, life, and spirit are fundamentally interconnected, challenging Ivakhiv's attempt to separate ecological dimensions.

This paper synthesizes key academic interpretations of capitalism, Shinto belief, and ecological critique to establish a coherent theoretical foundation. This narrative review identifies influential and representative studies that address the film's social, spiritual, and environmental dimensions, allowing recurring themes and critical debates to be contextualized. This review is then combined with close textual and visual analysis of selected scenes, focusing on narrative structure, character behavior, spatial organization, and audiovisual elements such as framing, movement, and sensory emphasis. Guided by Ivakhiv's *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, the analysis examines how meaning is produced across anthropomorphic, geomorphic, and animamorphic dimensions. Overall, this study demonstrates how consumerism, identity loss, hierarchy, and environmental pollution are not merely thematic concerns but are embedded within the film's ecological system of images, spaces, and relations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Japan's encounter with capitalism and modernity began during the Meiji period (1868–1912), when rapid industrialization and Westernization transformed social structures and economic systems. While economic modernization strengthened Japan's global position, it also destabilized traditional relationships between humans, nature, and the spiritual world (11). Shinto, which had emphasized harmony between these realms, was marginalized or reframed as an "antiquated" cultural tradition rather than a living practice in modern Japan (11). Following World War II, Japan experienced rapid economic growth during the postwar "economic miracle," culminating in the bubble economy of the 1980s. As Huffman documents, this period was marked by intensified consumerism, environmental pollution, and the prioritization of profit over ecological and social well-being (1). By the late 1980s, excessive monetary easing created a severe asset bubble, pushing real estate and stock prices to unprecedented levels (12). The collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s exposed the fragility of this model and produced widespread anxiety about identity, value, and purpose within Japanese society (1, 2).

It was within this historical context that the films of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli emerged as significant cultural responses (13). Founded in 1985 by Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli developed a distinctive body of animated works that critically reflected on the consequences of industrialization, environmental degradation, and modern consumer culture (2, 13). Miyazaki reintroduced spiritual and ecological perspectives from Shinto cosmology, depicting nature as inhabited by living spirits and emphasizing the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world (3). In 2001, Studio Ghibli released *Spirited Away,* which became the most commercially successful Japanese film at the time (13). While it is celebrated as a fantasy film for children, *Spirited Away* reflects broader social concerns associated with Japan's modern economic development, particularly the expansion of consumer culture during the bubble era. The abandoned theme park reflects the speculative overdevelopment and subsequent collapse associated with Japan's bubble economy, while the bathhouse's hierarchical labor structure mirrors the rigid structures that emerged during late capitalist expansion. Similarly, the polluted river spirit embodies the environmental consequences of rapid industrial growth, translating these historical processes into sensory and animamorphic cinematic form (2, 7). Together, these elements reveal modern Japanese capitalist society as an ecological system of images, spaces, and relations (9, 10).

SYNOPSIS

Spirited Away follows the story of Chihiro, a pubescent girl who is upset about moving to a new house. During the drive, her father takes a shortcut, and the family arrives at a mysterious tunnel. After passing through it, they discover an empty town filled with food stalls. Although Chihiro feels uneasy and reluctant, her parents begin eating food without permission and are soon transformed into pigs. Left alone in this spiritual world, Chihiro encounters Haku, a worker at a nearby bathhouse for spirits called Yuya. As night falls and spirits begin arriving, Chihiro starts to disappear, but Haku saves her by giving her food from the spirit world and instructs her to find work in the bathhouse in order to survive.

Following Haku's instructions, Chihiro enters the bathhouse and first seeks help from Kamaji, a spirit working in the boiler room. Although Kamaji cannot offer her a job, another worker named Lin helps guide her to the office of Yubaba, the powerful witch who owns the bathhouse. After persistently demanding employment, Chihiro is forced into a labor contract in which Yubaba steals part of her name and renames her Sen, symbolically weakening her identity and binding her to the bathhouse.

With Lin's guidance, Sen begins working in the bathhouse. At night, a "stink spirit" comes to the bathhouse. Sen's first task is to cleanse this foul-smelling spirit that other workers refuse to serve. During the cleansing, Sen pulls large amounts of human waste, such as bicycles and industrial trash, out of its body, revealing it to be a polluted river kami rather than a "stink kami." Grateful for her help, the river spirit rewards Sen with a special herbal medicine.

Meanwhile, a mysterious spirit called No-Face enters the bathhouse and begins bribing workers with gold, eventually consuming several of them and causing chaos. Around the same time, Haku secretly steals a magical golden seal belonging to Yubaba's twin sister, Zeniba. Cursed by Zeniba's protective spirits, Haku returns to the bathhouse in the form of a wounded dragon and crashes into the building. Sen risks punishment by helping him and uses the river spirit's medicine to break the curse, causing Haku to expel the seal and revert to his human form.

Determined to return the stolen seal and apologize to Zeniba, Sen travels by train with No-Face, Yubaba's transformed baby Boh, and a small bird companion to Zeniba's home. Zeniba forgives Haku and explains that love and compassion helped break the curse. During the journey back to Yuya, Sen realizes that Haku is actually the spirit of the Kohaku River who once saved her when she fell into it as a child, but he lost his identity after the river was destroyed.

Back at the bathhouse, Sen passes the final test by correctly identifying that none of the pigs are her parents. This breaks her contract and restores her true name, Chihiro. Haku guides her back to the tunnel, where she unites with her parents and becomes stronger and more confident.

CONSUMERISM AND LOSS OF IDENTITY

Hayao Miyazaki has described contemporary society as a "mass consumption civilization" entering its "dead throes," a concern that structures *Spirited Away* at every level (14). The film constructs it as an ecological system that reshapes space, behavior, and identity (10). Following Ivakhiv's framework, this system can be analyzed through geomorphic, anthropomorphic, and cinematic dimensions, which together reveal how capitalism produces meaning through environments and bodies instead of abstract ideology.

At the geomorphic level, which concerns how landscapes and built spaces generate meaning, the abandoned theme park in the film's opening scene (scene 1) establishes capitalist emptiness (2). The park, once designed for leisure and consumption, is now isolated, signalling what Napier identifies as the hollow promise of late-capitalist development: spaces created to stimulate desire but abandoned once profitability collapses (2). Ivakhiv emphasizes that cinematic spaces are not neutral backgrounds but active participants in creating meaning, and the theme park visually introduces capitalism as a system that overbuilds, overpromises, and ultimately discards. Although Miyazaki does not explicitly reference Japanese history, Chihiro's father's remark that such places were "built everywhere in the early 90s" reveals Japan's bubble-era urban expansion and speculative excess (15). The geomorphic emptiness of the park therefore foreshadows the moral and spiritual consequences of unchecked development and consumer confidence (2, 10).

The film's critique intensifies at the anthropomorphic level, which examines how environments shape human values, behavior, and ethical relations. Chihiro's parents serve as an immediate embodiment of capitalist entitlement. Their decision to eat food that does not belong to them and to pay the shop owner later reflects a worldview in which consumption is assumed to be harmless as long as one can pay. Their transformation into pigs (scene 2) illustrates capitalism's reduction of human identity to consumption alone (2, 9). As Napier suggests, *Spirited Away* presents capitalism not merely as encouraging excess but as dehumanizing, transforming individuals into bodies defined by appetite rather than ethics (2). From a Shinto perspective, this metamorphosis indicates spiritual pollution produced by indulgence detached from space, ritual, and responsibility (3).

Capitalism's systemic nature is embodied by Yubaba, who represents not only individual greed but also structural domination. Jaich and Ayumi interpret Yubaba as a figure shaped by Japan's modernization and its entanglement with Western capitalist ideology (8, 9). Ivakhiv's geomorphic dimension clarifies how this spatial hierarchy produces authority, insulating capital from the work that sustains it. Her power is expressed geomorphically through space: her office is elevated, expansive, and decorated with gold, visually separating her from the labor below (scene 3). Anthropomorphically, Yubaba's fixation on ownership extends to names, contracts, and even familial bonds (scene 4). Ayumi notes that her obsession with gold even outweighs maternal care for Boh, exemplified by her inability to recognize Boh in mouse form, demonstrating how capitalism distorts emotional priorities and commodifies relationships themselves (8).

The bathhouse workers' behaviors explain how capitalism normalizes participation in consumerism even among those it exploits. Mandal notes that the workers are not villains but absorbed subjects who internalize hierarchy and police one another in order to survive within the system (7). Anthropomorphically, they are conditioned subjects who equate value with wealth and security with obedience. Their frantic desire for No-Face's gold, in which disciplined senior workers humiliate themselves through exaggerated dances (scene 5), exposes how consumerism erodes dignity and identity. Ivakhiv's anthropomorphic framework reveals that capitalism reshapes emotional responses, training individuals to perform desire in exchange for material reward. As Quirk suggests, this loss of spiritual grounding reflects a broader disconnection from Shinto values, where ritual persists but its meaning has disappeared (5).

No-Face extends this critique by illustrating capitalism's psychological and emotional consequences. Initially silent and marginal, No-Face becomes monstrous (scene 6) only after absorbing the bathhouse's consumerist logic. He offers gold because gold is the language of value in this space. His repeated declaration – "I'm lonely…take the gold" – reveals that his excess is driven not by greed alone but by emotional isolation (15). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, this aligns with capitalism's production of endless desire without satisfaction (16). While No-Face operates animamorphically as a consuming body, Shinto perspectives frame him as spiritually destabilized rather than evil. Boyd and Nishimura emphasize that beings in Shinto cosmology shift between pollution and purification depending on context, and No-Face's recovery in Zeniba's home underscores that alternative, reciprocal environments can restore balance (3).

Against these figures, Chihiro emerges as the film's clearest ethical counterpart (9). From an anthropomorphic lens, she embodies an alternative subjectivity grounded in responsibility, memory, and restraint rather than desire. She refuses excessive consumption, rejects gold, and resists the bathhouse's logic of exchange. Jaich identifies her refusal of gold as one of the film's most radical gestures, directly challenging capitalism's illusion of abundance (8, 9).

Miyazaki has explicitly linked this vision to contemporary childhood, warning that children today are surrounded by "shallow industrial products" and risk losing sight of cultural roots (17). Chihiro's resistance thus becomes generational as well as ethical. The preservation of her name (scene 7) further reinforces this resistance. Napier and Jaich argue that the loss of names in the bathhouse represents capitalism's erasure of identity, reducing individuals to interchangeable units of labor (2, 9). In Shinto belief, identity is continuous and relational, shaped by memory and responsibility rather than productivity. By remembering her name, Chihiro performs an act of cultural and spiritual survival.

At the cinematic and extra-cinematic level, *Spirited Away* uses space, transformation, and narrative progression to link fantasy with real-world critique. Cinematically, capitalist spaces produce meaning by shaping behavior and desire; extra-cinematically, these spaces resonate with Japan's historical experience of rapid industrialization, consumer excess, and spiritual dislocation. Rather than offering a simple condemnation, Miyazaki exposes capitalism as an ecological system that deforms environments, identities, and relationships. Through Chihiro's quiet resistance, the film gestures toward ethical living within modernity, based not on nostalgia but on balance, memory, and care.

HIERARCHICAL SYSTEMS INSIDE THE BATHHOUSE

Hierarchy in Spirited Away operates not simply as a social arrangement but as an ecological system produced through space, behavior, and meaning. Following Ivakhiv's framework, hierarchy first emerges at the geomorphic level, where cinematic space itself structures relations of power (10).

The bathhouse is designed as a vertically stratified environment, with Yubaba positioned at its highest point both physically and ideologically (8, 9). Her office sits far above the working floors, reached through elongated corridors and guarded thresholds, which visually separate authority from labor. In Ivakhiv's terms, the geomorphic dimension concerns how landscapes, architecture, and spatial organization generate meaning (10). Here, elevation functions as power. Those who control capital occupy expansive, elevated spaces, while workers are confined to repetitive, compressed environments below (8, 9). Yubaba's spatial removal from the bathhouse floor ensures that she remains separated from the labor that sustains her wealth, exposing hierarchy as a system dependent on distance and invisibility rather than direct oversight (8, 9).

This spatial logic is reinforced through the sharp contrast between Yubaba's office and the workers' dormitories. Yubaba's office is excessive and ornate, while the workers' living quarters are crowded, functional, and without any privacy (scene 3) (8). Chihiro and Lin share narrow sleeping spaces (scene 8) that emphasize impermanence and disposability. As Napier observes, Miyazaki frequently uses spatial imbalance to reflect moral imbalance, and the unequal distribution of comfort and security illustrates hierarchy as a structure that privileges disciplined bodies (9). The dormitories regulate rest, movement, and emotional expression, ensuring that workers remain productive but never empowered. Hierarchy is thus embedded in the architecture that organizes daily life (5).

At the anthropomorphic level, hierarchy also manifests through behavior, social relations, and embodied experience. Ivakhiv uses the anthropomorphic dimension to describe how human values and actions are shaped by their surroundings (10). Within the bathhouse, this is most visible in the treatment of lower-

ranking workers. Entering the bathhouse, Chihiro is mocked and dismissed by senior workers (scene 9). Lin, despite her experience, is similarly subjected to harsh commands (9). These interactions reveal that hierarchy operates vertically and horizontally. Mandal notes that such systems foster internalized oppression, where the obedience among workers becomes a survival strategy (7). The bathhouse thus reshapes human behavior, training individuals to equate authority with cruelty and submission.

This spatial hierarchy is evident in the scene of Chihiro's first confrontation in Yubaba's office (scene 10), where cinematic form reinforces geomorphic power relations. The sequence is marked by prolonged vertical movement. As the elevator rises slowly through the bathhouse, it represents the distance from the top to the bottom of the bathhouse. When Yubaba finally appears, her booming voice and exaggerated gestures overwhelm the soundscape, drowning out Chihiro's hesitant speech and reinforcing hierarchy through auditory dominance as well as visual scale.

Yubaba's power over workers is maintained through contracts and dispossession rather than constant presence. The removal of names upon employment exemplifies hierarchy's deepest reach, as identity becomes conditional. Jaich argues that the loss of one's name transforms workers into interchangeable units of labor (9). Hierarchy here is not only economic but ontological, determining who is recognizable as a subject (9). Chihiro's vulnerability stems not from incompetence but from her position at the lowest rung of this system. Therefore, her treatment suggests how hierarchy requires visible inferiors to sustain itself (9).

The bathhouse hierarchy is rigid but arbitrary. Advancement depends not on merit but on proximity to power and profitability (9). Workers scramble to serve wealthy spirits while neglecting those deemed unprofitable, reinforcing a value system rooted in hierarchy rather than reciprocity. From an ecological perspective, the bathhouse functions as a closed system that recycles power upward while distributing stress downward. This structure exhausts those at the bottom and isolates those at the top, producing emotional fragmentation and moral decay (9, 10).

These dynamics become especially clear when viewed through Ivakhiv's distinction between the cinematic and the extra-cinematic. Cinematically, the bathhouse's spaces, movements, and interactions produce meaning through visual form: elevation, crowding, repetition, and distance encode hierarchy within the film's sensory world. Extra-cinematically, these representations resonate with modern capitalist labor structures, where hierarchy is naturalized through architecture, contracts, and workplace culture (9, 10).

When Ivakhiv argues that cinematic spaces produce meaning, *Spirited Away* demonstrates that the bathhouse does not merely depict hierarchy but enacts it, allowing viewers to feel its emotional and ethical consequences (10). While Shinto emphasizes harmony, reciprocity, and relational responsibility, this hierarchical ecology signifies profound spiritual imbalance marked by inequality. By placing Chihiro at the lowest level of this system, *Spirited Away* encourages viewers to experience hierarchy from the perspective of those it marginalizes, exposing its costs not as an abstract critique but as a lived reality.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

In *Spirited Away*, the river spirit animamorphically embodies environmental pollution, framing it not as a distant ecological issue but as an embodied, sensory, and moral crisis that foregrounds the necessity of environmental protection (5, 7).

As Chihiro helps purify the river spirit, industrial waste emerges from its body, highlighting that the spirit is polluted by the physical remnants of human consumption (7, 9). The industrial debris embedded within the river spirit evokes the legacy of rapid postwar development, when rivers increasingly absorbed the by-products of urban growth (1). Miyazaki refrains from explicit historical reference, but the recognizable waste suggests an environmental cost attached to modernization itself (1). This sequence is not symbolic in the abstract but grounded in real-life experience. Miyazaki has explained that the scene draws on his own experience cleaning a polluted local river, where embedded debris such as a bicycle had to be physically extracted, shaping the film's representation of environmental recovery (14).

Following Ivakhiv's ecological framework, pollution is first articulated at the animamorphic level. Ivakhiv introduces animamorphic ecology to account for spirits, gods, forces, and presences that are alive but are not biologically living (10). The polluted river spirit is initially mistaken for a "stink spirit" by bathhouse workers (scene 11), as the entity is defined by overwhelming filth, physical heaviness, and an unbearable stench (9). Despite the spirit representing a river, it functions neither geomorphically nor biomorphically. Rather, it operates animamorphically as a spiritual being whose

suffering discloses environmental degradation not only as a pressing ecological concern, but also as a moral crisis produced by human neglect and excess (5). By transforming pollution into a responsive presence, Miyazaki collapses the distance between human action and environmental consequence, insisting that ecological damage can be confronted as something alive, responsive, and affected by humans' behaviors (7).

Miyazaki's visual and narrative strategies make pollution tangible and emotionally confrontational. The river spirit's physicality reveals this embodied portrayal of pollution. Its slow movement and slumped posture visually communicate weight and exhaustion, suggesting that environmental degradation imposes a burden that limits vitality and flow (9). This heaviness reflects the accumulated impact of prolonged pollution (1). Smell here plays a crucial role in reinforcing the animamorphic force of the river spirit. Unlike visual pollution, which can often be ignored or reframed, smell is intrusive and difficult to avoid. The spirit's foul odor fills the bathhouse, provoking immediate disgust and panic among workers. Their instinctive reluctance to approach the spirit reflects a broader social tendency to avoid polluted environments rather than confront the behaviors that cause them (7). Psychological research supports this response, as Ferdenzi *et al.* demonstrate that unpleasant odors trigger strong affective reactions and avoidance behaviors because smell is closely tied to emotional processing and threat detection. However, the same study also points out that repeated exposure can lead to habituation, allowing individuals to overcome initial repulsion (18). This dynamic is mirrored in the film. While Chihiro initially recoils from the spirit's stench, continued engagement allows her to endure the sensory discomfort and participate in the cleansing process. Miyazaki thus uses smell not only to repel but to demand ethical endurance, denying audiences the comfort of detachment and forcing confrontation with the consequences of industrial excess.

The river spirit's transformation from a "stink spirit" into a rejuvenated river kami (scene 12) reflects a Shinto understanding of pollution as a reversible state, one that is accumulated through harmful human practices but can be cleansed through ritual care and ethical engagement (3, 5). As Jaich notes, the bathhouse itself functions as a traditional site of purification, which aligns with the act of washing the spirit, in which water restores balance between humans, kami, and the natural world (9). The purification is not achieved through magical authority or individual heroism but through sustained collective labour. Chihiro initiates the cleansing, yet it is only through the combined physical effort of the workers, pulling bicycles, pipes, and industrial waste from the spirit's body (scene 13), that purification becomes possible (7). At the anthropomorphic level, the workers' reactions reveal how the environmental crisis intersects with social behavior and moral responsibility.

Initially, responsibility for cleansing the spirit is displaced onto Chihiro, whose low status makes her expendable. This mirrors real-world patterns in which environmental labor is often assigned to the most vulnerable (9). However, the scene shifts as collective effort becomes inevitable. As all workers join in to help pull debris from the spirit's body, the physical exertion required to remove the waste underscores that environmental recovery demands shared effort rather than individual gain (7). The emphasis on cooperation aligns with Mandal's argument that Miyazaki frames ecological recovery as a shared moral obligation rather than a technological solution, countering capitalist tendencies to externalize environmental responsibility (7).

Cinematically, Miyazaki reinforces this message through pacing and spectacle. The slow rhythm of extraction contrasts with the bathhouse's usual emphasis on efficiency and consumption, visually opposing industrial logic. Ivakhiv's notion of cinematic ecology clarifies how these audiovisual choices produce meaning. The cinema lingers on strain, resistance, and release, allowing viewers to feel the labor involved in restoration. Extra-cinematically, the scene resonates with Japan's history of environmental reform following industrial disasters, suggesting that ecological healing is possible only through collective and sustained engagement (7).

LIMITATIONS

This analysis relies primarily on textual and visual interpretation supported by existing scholarship, rather than empirical audience studies. As a result, claims about audience reception and effective response remain interpretive rather than based on data. Additionally, the paper focuses predominantly on Japanese historical, cultural, and Shinto contexts, which may limit the applicability of its conclusions to transnational or global audiences who engage with the film through different cultural backgrounds. Finally, the study concentrates on *Spirited Away* as a single case, and broader comparative analysis across Miyazaki's filmography could further strengthen claims about recurring ecological themes. Despite all these constraints, this paper offers an

overview of existing scholarship on Miyazaki and *Spirited Away* interpreted through a new lens. Thanks to Ivakhiv's theory, the paper positions *Spirited Away* beyond the celluloid realm, espousing the argument that cinema is a creator of meaning in its impact on audiences and society. In this case, the film can be interpreted as a revelation of the capitalist structures and values that have shaped modern Japanese society. Through its depiction of the interdependence between humans, spirits, and nature, the film explores ethical responsibility and suggests the possibility of social models grounded in coexistence rather than consumption.

CONCLUSION

Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* presents capitalism not as a singular moral failing but as an ecological system that reorganizes space, identity, and labor (10). Through Ivakhiv's theory, the film's critique becomes clear across multiple dimensions (Table 1). Geomorphically, it is expressed through overbuilt and hierarchical spaces, such as the abandoned theme park and the vertically structured bathhouse. Anthropomorphically, it appears in characters whose values and behaviors are either reshaped by consumer logic or remain resistant to it. Animamorphically, it is reflected in polluted spirits that embody environmental harm as living suffering. Cinematically, it is conveyed through audiovisual strategies that draw audiences into sensory and emotional confrontation (9, 10). Miyazaki's integration of Shinto beliefs deepens this critique by framing pollution, greed, and identity loss as forms of spiritual imbalance rather than abstract social problems (3, 5). Figures such as Yubaba and No-Face reveal how capitalism distorts emotional priorities and produces endless desire without fulfillment, while the bathhouse workers illustrate how hierarchy normalizes complicity and erodes dignity (7, 8). Against this system, Chihiro emerges as an alternative ethical subject whose refusal of excess, preservation of memory, and commitment to collective responsibility signal the possibility of living differently within modernity (9). Rather than advocating a return to pre-industrial nostalgia, *Spirited Away* calls for ethical survival through balance, care, and relational accountability (2). By linking cinematic form to historical experience, this paper demonstrates that Miyazaki's film functions as both a cultural and an ecological intervention. In exposing the emotional, spiritual, and environmental costs of capitalist modernity, *Spirited Away* invites the audience, particularly younger generations, to reconsider value beyond consumption and to reconnect with traditions that emphasize restraint, reciprocity, and balance (5). Overall, this analysis demonstrates that animated film can serve as a serious medium for examining social, ecological, and cultural issues, challenging the assumption that animation is primarily driven by entertainment appeal. By applying Ivakhiv's *Ecologies of the Moving Image* to *Spirited Away*, the study offers a structured way to analyze cinema as an interconnected system in which spaces, characters, and non-human entities generate meaning together. This approach can also be applied to other works by Miyazaki.

Table 1. Ecological Dimensions and Thematic Patterns in Spirited Away.

Dimension	Key Pattern	Function in the Film	Evidence (Scenes)
Anthropomorphic	Capitalist consumption and excess	Critiques how unchecked consumption leads to moral and physical degradation	Scene 2, 5, 6
	Identity loss and labor control	Illustrates how capitalist systems strip individuality and reduce people to labor roles	Scenes 4, 9, 10
	Resistance and moral agency	Highlights the possibility of resisting commodification and preserving identity	Scenes 7, 13
Geomorphic	Abandoned consumer spaces	Reflects the emptiness and collapse of consumer capitalism	Scene 1
	Spatial hierarchy and power	Demonstrates how physical space reinforces social inequality and control	Scene 3
	Exploitative living conditions	Reveals the dehumanizing conditions of labor under capitalism	Scene 8

Continued Table 1. Ecological Dimensions and Thematic Patterns in Spirited Away.

Dimension	Key Pattern	Function in the Film	Evidence (Scenes)
Animamorphic	Embodiment of greed and excess	Uses supernatural figures to mirror human moral corruption	Scene 6
	Environmental degradation	Represents the consequences of human pollution on nature	Scene 11
	Ecological balance	Suggests the possibility of healing through collective action and care	Scene 12

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

REFERENCES

1. Huffman J. Japanese society in the twentieth century. Education About Asia. 2005. https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/japanese-society-in-the-twentieth-century-2/ (accessed on 2026-02-05). https://doi.org/10.65959/eaa.667
2. Napier SJ. Matter out of place: carnival, containment, and cultural recovery in Miyazaki's Spirited Away. *Journal of Japanese Studies*. 2006; 32 (2): 287-310. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25064646 (accessed on 2026-02-05). https://doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2006.0057
3. Boyd JW, Nishimura T. Shinto perspectives in Miyazaki's anime film Spirited Away. *Journal of Religion & Film*. 2004; 8 (3). https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1673&context=jrf (accessed on 2026-02-05). https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.08.03.04
4. Wright L. Forest spirits, giant insects and world trees: the nature vision of Hayao Miyazaki. *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 2005; 10: 1-12. https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.10.1.003
5. Quirk M. Stepping into the bathhouse: physical space and Shinto revival in Miyazaki's Spirited Away. *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies*. 2021; 11 (1): 1-16
6. Jegers E. Watching Nausicaä in the age of environmental catastrophe. 2021. https://tertangala.net/watching-nausicaa-in-the-age-of-environmental-catastorphe/ (accessed on 2026-02-05)
7. Mandal B. The insertion of cultural identity and ecological recovery through a critique of materialism and overconsumption in Spirited Away and My Neighbor Totoro. PostScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal. 2022;7. https://postscriptum.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/pS7.iBipasha.pdf (accessed on 2026-02-05)
8. Ayumi S. A nightmare of capitalist Japan: Spirited Away. Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media. 2009; (51). https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/SpiritedAway/text.html (accessed on 2026-02-05)
9. Jaich LJ. Caught between two worlds: resolving Japan's modern identity in Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away (2001) [honors thesis]. Riverside (CA): University of California, Riverside; 2017. https://escholarship.org/content/qt25x1h62f/qt25x1h62f.pdf (accessed on 2026-02-05)
10. Ivakhiv AJ. Ecologies of the moving image: cinema, affect, nature. Waterloo (ON): Wilfrid Laurier University Press; 2013. https://doi.org/10.51644/9781554589067
11. Wright L, Clode J. The animated worlds of Hayao Miyazaki: filmic representations of Shinto. Metro Magazine. 2005; 143: 46-50. https://pdfcoffee.com/the-animated-worlds-of-hayao-miyazaki-pdf-free.html (accessed on 2026-02-05)
12. Shiryaev AN, Zhitlukhin MN, Ziemba WT. Land and stock bubbles, crashes and exit strategies in Japan circa 1990 and in 2013. London: Systemic Risk Centre Discussion Paper 20; 2014. https://www.systemicrisk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dp-20.pdf (accessed on 2026-02-05)
13. Chen S. From Benshi to Ghibli: The Evolution of Japanese Animation and Hayao Miyazaki's Artistic Legacy. *Communications in Humanities Research*. 2025; 58 (1): 32-33. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/2025.22076
14. Talbot M. The auteur of anime. Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus. 2006 Mar 29; 4 (3): Article 1900. Available from: https://apjjf.org/margaret-talbot/1900/article (accessed on 2026-03-21). https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466006004505
15. Miyazaki H., director. Spirited Away. Tokyo: Studio Ghibli; 2002.
16. Gilles D, Félix G. Anti-Oedipus: From psychoanalysis

to schizopolitics. *Semiotext(e).* 1977; 2 (3): 35-37

17. The earth speaks to us all: a critical appreciation of filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki's Shinto environmental philosophy. Christian Scholars Review. https://christianscholars.com/the-earth-speaks-to-us-all-a-critical-appreciation-of-filmmaker-hayao-miyazakis-shinto-environmental-philosophy/ (accessed on 2026-03-21)
18. Ferdenzi C, Poncelet J, Rouby C, Bensafi M. Repeated exposure to odors induces affective habituation of perception and sniffing. *Front Behav Neurosci.* 2014; 8: 119. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/behavioral-neuroscience/articles/10.3389/fnbeh.2014.00119/full (accessed on 2026-02-05). https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2014.00119