

Review #24 : 千と千尋の神隠し (2001)

Miyazaki's Magic



REVIEW

Viewing Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* for the first time, I was struck by a quality between **generosity and love**. You will be caught up by the **boundless imagination** of the story. Animation is a painstaking process, and there is a tendency to simplify its visual elements. Miyazaki, in contrast, offers **meticulous complexity and richness in details**. We may not pay much conscious attention to it, yet it reinforces the remarkable precision of his fantasy worlds...

Spirited Away is surely **one of the finest of all animated films** and it has its foundation in the traditional bedrock of animation, which is frame-by-frame drawing. Miyazaki began his career in that style, but he also permitted the use of computers for some of the busywork :

'We take handmade cell animation and digitize it in order to enrich the visual look, but everything starts with the human hand drawing.' (2002)

The story of *Spirited Away* has been populated with limitless creativity. Has any film ever contained more different kinds of beings that we have never seen anywhere before? Miyazaki's imagination never rests. There is a scene where the heroine and her companion get off a train in the middle of a swamp. In the distant forest they see a light approaching. This turns out to be an old-fashioned light pole that is hopping along on one foot. It bows to them, turns, and lights the way on the path they must take. When they arrive at a cottage, it dutifully hangs itself above the gate. The living light pole is not necessary. It is a gift from Miyazaki.

His story involves a 10-year-old girl named Chihiro – who isn't one of those cheerful little automatons that populate many animated films. She is impatient and impetuous, as she's stuck in the back seat during a long drive to a house her parents want to examine. Her father loses the way in a dark forest, and the road seems to end at the entrance to a tunnel. Investigating it, they find it leads to an abandoned amusement park. But at dusk, some of the shops seem to reopen, especially a food shop whose fragrances steam into the cool air. Her parents fall eagerly upon the counter jammed with food, and stuff their mouths. Chihiro is stubborn and says she isn't hungry. Her parents eat so much they double or triple in size. They eat like pigs, and they become pigs...

The amusement park leads to a gigantic floating bathhouse whose turrets and windows and ledges and ornamentation pile endlessly upon themselves. A friendly boy warns her to return, but she is too late, and the bathhouse casts off from the shore. Chihiro ventures inside, and finds a world of infinite variety. She cannot find her way out again. The boy says everyone must have a job, and sends her to Kamaji, an old bearded man with eight elongated limbs, who runs the boiler room. He and a young girl advise her to apply to Yubaba, who owns the bathhouse. This is a fearsome old witch who exhales plumes of smoke and a cackling laugh.

This is the beginning of an extraordinary adventure. Chihiro will meet no more humans in the bathhouse. She will be placed under a spell by Yubaba, who steals her name and gives her a new one, Sen. Unless she can get her old name back again, **she can never leave.** One confusing space opens onto another in the bathhouse, whose population is a limitless variety of bizarre life-forms. There are little fuzzy black balls with two eyeballs, who steal Sen's

shoes. Looming semi-transparent No Faces, who wear masks over their ghostly shrouds. Three extraordinary heads without bodies, who hop about looking angry, and resemble caricatures of Marx. There is a malodorous heap of black slime, a river creature whose body has sopped up piles of pollution. Shape-shifting, so common in Japanese fantasy, takes place here, and the boy who befriended her is revealed as a lithe sea dragon with fierce fangs...



Sen makes her way through this world – befriended by some, shunned by others, threatened by Yubaba, learning as she goes. Her pluck and determination win our affection. She becomes determined to regain her name and return to the mainland on a daily train (which only runs one way). She wants to find her parents again.

Miyazaki's films are more absorbing than the frantic action in a lot of American animation. He himself said about them :

‘The people who make the movies are scared of silence, so they want to paper and plaster it over. They're worried that the audience will get bored. But just because it's 80 percent intense all the time doesn't mean the kids are going to bless you with their concentration. What really matters is the underlying emotions – that you never let go of those. (...) You can't just bombard people with noise and distraction. (...) If you stay true to joy and astonishment and

empathy you don't have to have violence and you don't have to have action. They'll follow you. This is our principle.'