

Transcendent Figures: On Transcendence in Miyazaki's Fantastic Worlds

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This chapter is concerned with the works of Miyazaki Hayao and investigates how transcendence is communicated by his fantastic worlds and characters that are often based on Japanese religions and mythology. These characters and worlds thereby represent Japanese iconography and mythological images, while being created in a way to cater to the modern, global world. Furthermore, they are designed to visualise the transcendent in immanent structures by using specific visual effects, designs, and shapes. By establishing a typology of the portrayal of transcendence in immanent forms, I will show how Miyazaki's fantastic worlds and characters deal with the difference of transcendence and immanence.

Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit Werken von Miyazaki Hayao und stellt sich vor dem Hintergrund der Nutzung japanischer religiöser und mythologischer Elemente die Frage, inwiefern seine fantastischen Darstellungen Transzendenz verkörpern. Sie spiegeln unumgänglich japanische Ikonographie und mythologische Bilder aus japanischen Religionen wider, während sie zugleich für die moderne, globale Welt entworfen wurden. Die Welten und Figuren sind zudem so charakterisiert, dass sie das Transzendente in immanenten Formen sichtbar werden lassen. In diesem Beitrag wird daher eine Typologie dargestellter Transzendenz in immanenten Formen vorgeschlagen, mit der gezeigt wird, wie Miyazakis fantastische Welten und Charaktere die Differenz von Transzendenz und Immanenz bearbeiten.

Introduction

In my grandparents' time, it was believed that spirits [*kami*] existed everywhere – in trees, rivers, insects, wells, anything. My generation does not believe this, but I like the idea that we should all treasure everything because spirits might exist there, and we should treasure everything because there is a kind of life to everything. (Miyazaki Hayao, qtd. in Boyd and Nishimura 7–8)

Miyazaki Hayao's famed animated movies – e.g., *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*, or the globally acknowledged *Spirited Away* – overflow with fantastic¹ characters, mythological elements, and religious themes. The above-mentioned quote from 2002 shows that Miyazaki is deeply inspired by the notions and traces of animism² that are often attributed to the Shinto³ religion (see for his global reach Ogihara-Schuck). Miyazaki's movies are a globally known example of how religion is adapted in Japanese popular culture, yet it is far from a unique occurrence. Religious themes are frequently used in videogames, anime, and manga. Be it in Nakamura Hikaru's manga and anime adaption *Saint Young Men*, in which Jesus and Gautama Buddha live as roommates, the videogame *Ōkami*, in which the player is the Shinto deity Amaterasu-ōmikami in wolf form and sets out to save the world from darkness, or the anime movie *Your Name* by Shinkai Makoto (Studio CoMix Wave Films), in which one of the main characters is a shrine maiden and the family's shrine and rituals serve an important function in the story's progression.

Popular Culture and Playful Religion: *shūkyō asobi*

How religion appears in anime and manga can vary greatly. Additionally, how media that utilises religious themes is viewed, received, or used for educational purposes further underlines the interconnection of pop cultural media and religion. Scholar of religion Jolyon Baraka Thomas therefore introduces the model of *shūkyō*

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- 1 I follow Reider's application of Todorov's definition of the fantastic, who recognises the criticism of his approach, but considers it useful in regard to Miyazaki's film *Spirited Away*: "the fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 25, qtd. in Reider 5).
 - 2 Animism is a contested term in academia. For reasons of simplification, animism here is used as a broad term that includes the socio-religious notion that mankind coexists with a spiritual realm, and that the world around is animated, bearing (the potential of) a spirit or conscious. In Japan particularly, this is connected to the Shinto traditions (cf. Rambelli 3–5).
 - 3 Shinto, formerly often called Shintoism, is a Japanese religious tradition that focuses on *kami*, spirits or deities, that inhabit and protect nature. During the Meiji period, Shinto was adapted by the state and "State Shinto" was established. Today, Shinto is still one of the most influential religious traditions in Japan, involving only little dogma, but instead is very ritual-heavy (cf. Breen and Teeuwen).

asobi, playful religion or religious entertainment, to conceptualise the “conflation of religion and entertainment” (Thomas, “Anime” 74) in regard to anime and manga. By “pointing to instances where modifications of religious behavior and outlook occur within spaces equally devoted to entertainment or, alternatively, where religious practice and pedagogy simultaneously behave as entertainment experiences” (Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition* 17), Thomas’ concept *shūkyō asobi* serves as a helpful tool for the analysis of both the production and reception of such conflated media.

Thomas identifies six constituents of *shūkyō asobi*, namely (1) entertainment media that is religious in production or consumption, (2) that helps negotiating religious needs as an alternative strategy in the post-modern world, (3) that uses and alters religious themes, (4) affects people morally and religiously. Moreover, *shūkyō asobi* (5) looks at the overlapping area of religion and entertainment media, while still considering both separately, and (6) singles out instances and situations, in which the consumption of entertainment media supports or facilitates religious behaviour or learning (cf. Thomas, “Anime” 74).

Thomas showcases *shūkyō asobi* in Miyazaki’s movies by discussing the creator’s viewpoints and the audience’s reception. Not only does Miyazaki himself refer to his wish to entertain his audience, while his own religious (or spiritual) notions necessarily influence his works, he also considers the “consumer demand for spiritual content in Japan and continues to make movies with this in mind” (Thomas, “Anime” 83). The viewers – Thomas refers to his acquaintances and fan boards online – often watch the movies against the backdrop of a religious framework. They recognise religious, mythological, or spiritual themes, symbolism, and characters, and connect these religio-fantastic elements to empirical reality (cf. Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition* 118–23). According to Thomas and Miyazaki, this goes beyond institutionalised religion, but instead refers to basic religio-cultural conceptions of the world and nature.

While I consider Thomas’s approach of *shūkyō asobi* helpful for a first orientation as to how religion and entertainment media like anime or manga are connected, it focuses much on what is intended by the producers of such media, leaving out the medium and

its own agency almost entirely. It is certainly important to investigate Miyazaki's ideas behind his work to understand some decisions of the production, yet what the movies' imagery itself communicates allows for an analysis beyond Miyazaki's own intentions. Since viewers are exposed to the movies and mostly not to Miyazaki's interviews, their reception is heavily based on what the imagery and story of the movies communicate. This chapter intends to investigate exactly that. I propose that one does neither need to know the intentions of Miyazaki nor the Japanese religious landscape and traditions to recognise religion in Miyazaki's films, because the imagery communicates religion through fantastical elements that can be easily recognised as referring to transcendence, and therefore to religion.

Religion in Japan: A Complicated Matter?

Before taking a closer look at Miyazaki's movies and transcendence, it is necessary to briefly address religion in Japan. Despite it being a widely used theme in videogames, anime and manga, Japanese people rarely refer to themselves as religious. There are many studies that compare the often-contradicting statistical data on religiosity in Japan: depending on what source is reviewed, only 30% of Japanese people are religious, or over 80% are adherents to Shinto and 90% to Buddhism, exceeding the maximum of 100%. Common reasons for the contradictory data are the Japanese term for religion, *shūkyō*, how it is socially conceptualised, and how the surveys are designed (cf. Thomas, "Anime" 73; in detail cf. Roemer).

The Japanese term *shūkyō* was introduced in the 19th century as a translation for "religion" as a result of intellectual contacts between America and Europe and Japan, linking the term to foreign religious traditions. On the contrary, "Japanese religions" such as Buddhist or Shinto traditions are commonly understood as "Japanese culture" in present-day Japan (cf. Josephson). Inevitably, Japanese people visit shrines, temples, and religious festivals frequently, and they take part in religious rituals such as Shinto weddings, purification rituals or Buddhist funerals without necessarily calling

themselves religious or even followers of either tradition. Many people also buy and hold onto so-called *o-mamori*, talismans that can be purchased at shrines and temples and have a variety of uses (protection, safe travels, childbirth, wealth etc.). Getting an *o-mikuji*, a random fortune, is very common, too. All these things can be considered religious activity, subsumed under the concept of *genze riyaku*, this-worldly benefits, as theorised by Reader and Tanabe about how religious behaviour in present-day Japan is mostly directed towards the merit of life in the mortal world rather than doctrine or the afterlife (cf. Reader and Tanabe).

The 1995 sarin-gas attack by the new religious movement Aum Shinrikyō on the Tokyo subway further rendered religion(s) problematic. This terrorist attack highly influenced how religion was medially discussed and fostered fear of religious extremists. However, religion and religious groups gained renewed respect after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, since they were amongst the first ones who came to East Japan to help physically and financially. Not only did their support in cleaning, hosting, and rebuilding people's houses impress the Japanese society, religious groups also served a crucial role in offering counselling, spiritual care, funerals, and festivals to reunite the people in spite of the difficult situation (cf. McLaughlin, "Did Aum Change Everything?"; McLaughlin, "Spiritual Care"; Klien; Sharbat Dar).

Nevertheless, my own experience in the field in Japan during fieldwork in 2018 and 2022 show that most Japanese people still rather not call themselves religious and do not consider their shrine visits etc. as religious acts right away, even if they recognise *kami* (gods, spirits, deities) and Bodhisattvas as religious figures and shrines and temples as religious spaces. Instead, shrine and temple visits and saying a prayer there are described as cultural acts that belong to the Japanese way of life.

Religion and Transcendence

Religion is a strongly contested term in academia, especially in the study of religion. For the purpose of this chapter, I work with Volkhard Krech's communication theoretical approach that brings together notions by sociologist Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics (cf. Krech 49-56). I start from the premise that the function of religion is to deal with contingency at the last instance. This means that religious communication processes, i.e., religiously coded signs and semantics, help society, groups or/and individuals in handling contingent situations by processing the difference of transcendence and immanence. That is the difference of what is available, observable, and what is unavailable, non-observable. Accordingly, verbal, or non-verbal (mimical, actional etc.) religious communication attempts to transform what is unavailable (the transcendent) into something that is available (the immanent). This communication process subsequently conceals the paradox to observe what is unobservable – the main problem of most religions (see Krech 57–60). An example could be religious communication when somebody falls severely ill. One may say the sickness is a sign of the gods to show their disapproval of the person's wrongdoings. In this example, the disapproval of the gods is unobservable, but made observable or witnessable by religiously coding the illness as the result of the gods' punishment, which is therefore observable and witnessable.

What is transcendence in this context exactly? Scholars of social phenomenology regard everything that is not a genuine part of one's own experiences as transcendence. Therefore, there are many different transcendences, e.g., dreams, the future, the past, sociality to name a few. Thomas Luckmann suggests separating three forms of transcendence: (1) small transcendence (what cannot be experienced by an individual in the present moment due to temporal and spatial limitations); (2) medium transcendence (experiences of another individual); (3) great transcendence (domain of religion) (cf. Luckmann). Krech criticises Luckmann's approach because it is too vague: Krech rather suggests speaking of religious transcendence as second-order transcendence in order to entirely separate it from

other forms of transcendence. Otherwise, anything except for the immediate experience of the present could be called religious, inflating the term religion unnecessarily (cf. Krech 54).

What I mean by transcendence in this chapter is the unavailable, the unobservable, the inevitable; anything that is beyond communication. Yet, in religious communication the transcendent is made available in the immanent by using signs that portray, indicate, or reference the transcendent in immanent structures. These signs include (a) icons (e.g., images of a deity; portraits of Jesus), (b) indicia (e.g., interpretation of clouds formations as a deity's work), and (3) symbols (e.g., the *torii* for Shinto; the crescent moon and a star for Islam; the cross for Christianity). All three types of signs are used in verbal and non-verbal religious communication frequently (cf. Krech 52–56).

Now, the question of this chapter is how the transcendent is communicated by the imagery of Miyazaki's characters and worlds that are composed of fantastic elements and immanent structures. It needs to be noted that I am neither interested in detecting "iconographical" traces, nor in linking my findings to devotional art in general. Not only would both need a thorough discussion of Japanese iconography and art history with a reference to Buddhist and Shinto theologies, but doing so would also serve the purpose of "revealing" what Miyazaki supposedly "hid" in his films. While there already are many studies that analyse Miyazaki's characters, his notions, or the reception of the films in this regard (cf. e.g., Boyd and Nishimura; Reider; Napier; Masaki; Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition*; Kawakatsu; Yoneyama), I am not interested in Miyazaki's explanations of the imagery or what mythological aspects his films are based on. Instead, I look at what the imagery communicates independently of his intentions.

Miyazaki Hayao's Movies

Miyazaki's oeuvre consists of over ten featured films that he directed and wrote himself, a couple of short films, manga, and other Studio Ghibli movies, to which he contributed in one way or another.

His films are known for “his richly realized fantasy worlds and his memorable female characters” (Napier). For this chapter, I will only look at three exemplary movies that portray religion and transcendence, and that mostly refer to the realm of “Japanese religious traditions” like animism, Shinto, or Buddhism. The movies that serve as basis for the typology I will later present are *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), and *Spirited Away* (2001).

In *My Neighbor Totoro* (*MNT*), the sisters Satsuki and Mei move to the countryside with their father to be closer to their mother, who is hospitalised due to a long-term illness. During their stay, the younger sibling Mei discovers and befriends some smaller and one big creature whom she finds sleeping under a great camphor tree. She interprets his growl as his name “Totoro”, a mispronunciation of the Japanese word for “troll”. Mei wants her father and sister to meet Totoro but fails to find him again. When they find the tree, it is covered by *shide* (paper streamers usually used in Shinto ritual and to demarcate sacred space). After thanking the tree for taking care of Mei, the family returns home. Satsuki meets Totoro for the first time while waiting for the bus in the rain with the sleeping Mei on her back. She offers him an umbrella, before he leaves in a Catbus after thanking her by offering her seeds. The family plants the seeds and during the night Totoro and his friends, later joined by the two girls, show up for a ritual dance to make the plants grow. Later in the movie, Mei runs away from home because she is upset that her mother needs to stay in hospital for a little longer. She wants to bring her an ear of corn. Satsuki asks the neighbours and Totoro for help to find her sister. Together, the girls board the Catbus that takes them to the hospital to see their mother from afar and Mei delivers the ear of corn to the windowsill, before going back home. The movie ends with Totoro watching the girls reunite with the neighbours at night after returning thanks to the Catbus.

MNT, sometimes reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland* (Napier), is full of fantastic creatures: small black *susuwatari* (wandering soot) who occupy the house prior to the family settling in, Totoro and his friends (smaller versions of him) who live in the woods, and the famed Catbus that offers his transport services to the girls

and Totoro, jumping over roofs and trees with ease. According to Miyazaki, the movie does not refer to any religion. Mei also first thinks of Totoro as a troll, the family's prayer at the big camphor tree with *shide* strongly suggests that he and his friends are most probably *kami*, spirits, or deities, that protect the people and nature of the area. In contrast to other *kami*, Totoro is a fluffy, magical, and likable creature that can be interpreted as a reconsideration of nature spirits, representing an alternative to the institutional *kami* portrayal of the Shinto tradition (McCarthy qtd. in Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition* 115).

The plot of *Princess Mononoke* (*PM*) follows the young prince Ashitaka on a quest to redeem himself from a curse and protect nature by saving the forest *kami*. After a fight against an angry demon that attacked his village, Ashitaka suffers a curse that slowly consumes and kills him but makes him supernaturally strong. The village discovers that the demon was a boar god who had an iron ball lodged in his great body. To break the curse and get to the bottom of the world's unrest, he travels to the western lands on his pet serow Yakul. On his way, he encounters the so-called *shishigami*, who controls a huge forest that is being destroyed by Lady Eboshi and her henchmen in order to build up the iron industry in Iron-town. In the battle for the forest, the *kami* is killed, and all nature starts to aggressively rot away. With the help of San – Princess Mononoke –, a girl raised among the wolves who hates humankind, Ashitaka tries to (re)unite humans and nature. The *shishigami* blesses him at the end, when Irontown is destroyed, and the forest reclaimed its space.

PM captures Miyazaki's concern over the role of humans in the eco-system for the movie clearly criticises the destruction of nature (Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition* 116–17). The enchanted forest, in which the *shishigami* dwells, could be seen as a liminal space that links the supernatural and reality, and holds both danger and adventure. Cindy Toh notes, "Miyazaki hence inspires feelings of veneration in audiences to encourage admiration of nature's beauty and strength, humility in modern humanity's shortcomings, and submission to the natural order" (Toh 143). Scholar of religion Hoff Kraemer also discusses the protagonist Ashitaka in regard to

his salvific portrayal in the story as “mediator, martyr, and finally, savior” (Hoff Kraemer 3).

In the famed *Spirited Away* (*SA*), young girl Chihiro journeys to the *kami* realm in a unique quest to redeem her parents. On the way to their new home, Chihiro and her parents discover a tunnel that takes them to another world. Because her parents eat the offerings for the *kami* at a food stall without permission and are then turned into pigs, Chihiro must try to turn them back into humans to go back home. In the process, she meets Haku, who helps her by introducing her to the *yōkai* (demon) Yubaba, who allows her to work at her bathhouse for *kami*. Chihiro is given a new name, Sen (another reading of the first character of her name), and meets various creatures, monsters, and *kami* during her stay. While on duty, she has to clean a river god whose body is polluted with trash, and after Chihiro literally pulls a handle to redeem the river god of the trash, he gives her a sweet that she can use to save her parents. Until she achieves this, Chihiro encounters different challenges. With the help of Haku, who turns out to be a river god himself and whom she frees from a curse with the candy she received, Yubaba's twin sister Zeniba, as well as her own power, she can finally escape the *kami* realm with her parents.

SA offers many fantastic and religious moments to the audience, combining characters from Japanese folklore and mythology with a young and courageous heroine that is determined to save her parents while surrounded by magic and *kami*. The Japanese title of *Spirited Away* is *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, which literally translates to “Sen and Chihiro's hiding by *kami*”. This is a reference to the older common belief that women or children that disappeared for long were taken into (and hidden in) the spiritual world by *kami*. Although Miyazaki considers his film more of a fairy tale (cf. Reider 8-9), audiences interpret some of the scenes (like the river god scene, in which Chihiro cleanses his body by removing trash) as religious (cf. Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition* 118–19). In many ways, *Spirited Away* comes across as a typical movie set in a fantasy world inhabited by monsters – and Miyazaki certainly intended to make Yubaba's dwelling place look foreign to Japanese viewers by creating it in a pseudo-western style (cf. Reider 6). But against the back-

drop of the Japanese religious tradition of Shinto and Buddhism, according to which people are supposed to serve and take care of a multitude of different-looking *kami* who in return bless the people, *Spirited Away* is an exemplary portrayal of how Miyazaki applies religious themes and aesthetics in his movies.

Elements of Transcendence in Miyazaki's Films: A Typology

This proposed typology is not uniquely applicable to Miyazaki's films, yet it is the result of an analysis of how his imagery communicates transcendence. It is also not exhaustive since I only took into consideration three of his many films. I suggest it as a starting point to analyse the portrayal of transcendence in films through fantastic elements.

Clandestine Realms – Multidimensionality

In Miyazaki's films, there are many instances in which another realm plays a significant role for the story. Usually, these worlds are inhabited by fantastic creatures like great wolves, speaking animals, or other *kami* of all sorts, and they may have another timeline, alternative sources of light, or an inversion of physics. These other, fantastic, hidden worlds are often addressed as liminal spaces that incorporate elements from the real and the supernatural realms (cf. Boyd and Nishimura 6; Toh 143).

Going beyond this narratological analysis, these concealed spaces communicate transcendence on different levels. First and foremost, they are somewhere else, hidden, secret like the cave of Totoro, *shishigami's* forest or the realm of the *kami* in *SA*. This already suggests that there is something there not everyone can or should find, making these spaces and their inhabitants exclusive. Consequently, these realms and what is in there seem special and precious, as well as mysterious and somewhat scary (Miyazaki's imagery leaves room for both interpretations). Those who are able, allowed or forced to arrive at these places are also special or eligible

for a task (e.g., exceptionally good, innocent, or chosen), yet relatable for the viewers, since they are the main characters of the films, and thus allow the viewer to identify with them.

In addition to that, the clandestine realms are difficult to reach, and the protagonists sometimes need guidance or a fateful encounter that leads them to the other dimension (safely). This underlines the exclusivity and uniqueness of these spaces, while also creating the idea that the spaces coexist with reality in another dimension, always there, but not always available (as shown in *MNT*, when Mei is found lying somewhere completely different than Totoro's cave). By evoking multidimensionality and layered worlds, the imagery in the films creates an ambivalence of experience, sometimes also overcoming the limits of time (especially visible in *SA*, when at the end of the movie, Chihiro's family returns to their car which now is covered in leaves and somewhat drawn into the forest).

Lastly, the clandestine realms in Miyazaki's films are in stark contrast to the "human" world, sometimes appearing as eerie and unsafe (dark, unknown, or unrecognisable creatures, scary noises etc.), or perfectly nurtured, paradise-like, pure, safe (rich greens, flowers blooming, bright blue skies, no disturbances). Lights may come from unknown sources during the night, creating a landscape that is removed even from the universe we know.

Shapeshifting

Shapeshifting is a common trope in Japanese mythology and folklore, especially with regard to animals like the fox (cf. e.g., Bath-gate). While it can happen in various ways, shapeshifting almost always involves at least two distinct forms of a creature, and a reason for them to shapeshift. In Miyazaki's films, shapeshifting communicates the transcendence of a creature's being as opposed to its shape.

There are many shapeshifters in Miyazaki's worlds like Haku, who is depicted as a boy and a big, white dragon, while he actually is a river (deity) in *SA*, or the *shishigami* that transforms during the night and walks through the forest in *PM*. Yubaba and Zeniba,

the *yōkai* twins of *SA*, have the magical ability to turn others into creatures. The conditions of transformation vary in each case, but by using shapeshifting, Miyazaki's imagery communicate how the true form or character of a creature stays hidden and unknown. You may see their different faces but may never know what their real form is. The being of a creature is disconnected from their shape and form, allowing them to literally transcend their bodies. The limitations of a physical body are overcome, and they can turn into immaterial forms, as well (see invisibility). This clearly suggests animistic notions.

Not only does shapeshifting express notions of overcoming one's physical form, but it also communicates the ambivalence of spirits and deities that shapeshift. The shapes they take on could be connected to different duties, concepts, or moods, leaving the characters and the viewer wondering who they actually are and if they could ever know their true form – if there even is something like this.

Invisibility & Translucence

Invisibility and translucence are other ways of communicating transcendence in Miyazaki's films, and a special form of shapeshifting, which is why I separated these types. While most characters and things are depicted as manifest and visible, some creatures only appear at specific moments or times, and others are depicted as diaphanous, and the viewer can see right through them. Their bodies are not fixed and manifest but appear as transparent. Throwing a glimmering or light shade on what is behind them, these diaphanous or invisible shapes designate the characters as opposites of the human, manifest world.

If a character is drawn as translucent or even completely invisible (only shades suggesting their presence), they are not always trackable. They can appear randomly, like the small Totoro guiding Mei to the camphor tree in *MNT*, and disappear just as quickly. They may only arrive at the scene when needed or upon request. In *PM*, the small *kodama*, possibly forest spirits that supposedly repre-

sent the forest's health, only appear when the forest is healthy. They disappear when it dies out, personating the transcendence of the forest's life in their immanent form to the characters in *PM*, and the viewers, too.

Translucent or invisible creatures communicate a sense of freedom and independence through their form. They do not really belong to the real world, but instead they seem to live in different realms, only coming to visit the present dimension. When they do arrive in the real world, their bodies can be demanifested and translucent. They cannot be caught or ruled, for their location when invisible is unknown. Since some characters may turn visible at will or when something happens, their presence communicates good will, fortune, and health. Moreover, characters like *kaonashi* from *SA*, that are translucent to some extent during most of the movie, seem to personify the "in-between", the belonging and not belonging to the present realm. It is this "in-between the dimensions"-kind of concept that is translated by drawing quasi-invisible or diaphanous creatures that contrast the manifest characters.

Immediate Influence on Nature

This type is both the most obvious, and the broadest of them all, because the influence on nature and natural phenomena is a common theme in religion and films about magic and fantasy. Nature and natural beings, particularly trees, rivers, seas, animals, volcanos etc., often serve to display the power of supernatural beings by "obeying" them. In Miyazaki's films, the power to alter nature communicates transcendence by overcoming what is physically possible with immediate and great effect.

In *MNT*, the sisters and Totoro and his friends perform a ritual dance next to newly planted seeds, making them grow over night. Totoro also flies through the world on a tiny spintop, which creates enormous winds. In *PM*, Ashitaka is saved by the touch of the *shishigami*, who also walks on water. His touch can support or even ruin the forest's health, too. In *SA*, Chihiro is engulfed in the water that is controlled by the river god whom she saved during his bath.

While showered in the water, he can talk to her, and she seemingly can breathe and see without a problem.

These few examples demonstrate how differently this type is applied in Miyazaki's films. What the supernatural beings do or allow others like Chihiro to do shows how physical limitations can be overcome, and that there is (some sort of) natural hierarchy that follows specific power relations. Beings like Totoro and the *shishigami* are depicted in a way that their shape already suggests otherness, while their skill and power – what they do, essentially – position them above nature and mankind. They also make navigation through the worlds for humans, and viewers, easier, because they are presented as knowledgeable, mighty and highly significant for the world's or nature's continuous existence and growth.

Conclusion

The imagery used in Miyazaki's films employs different elements to communicate transcendence. Miyazaki certainly plays with religion, as Thomas suggests, but whether Miyazaki intended to communicate transcendence, is not important. Rather than focusing on what something might mean or how it connects back to real religious traditions, the images themselves have agency insofar as they (and one's understanding of them) are shaped by the semantics of society. Consequently, some images are indices and refer to something else (e.g., shapeshifting), some are icons that clearly represent a deity or *kami*, and some are symbols. From a communicational approach to religion, Miyazaki's characters and worlds in *MNT*, *PM* and *SA* can be understood as religious, since they portray transcendence in immanent or, more significantly, in fantastic structures. It is not some kind of mystical power of images that "influences" viewers or conveys religion – as sometimes suggested by scholars – but what is crucial in this is the images' semantic and social embeddedness that communicate religious themes and transcendence through different signs. My suggested typology summarises some of the most crucial elements that translate transcendence into immanent and fantastic forms in Miyazaki's films, portraying how the

fantastic interplays with the religious when used within a specific religio-cultural framework.

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