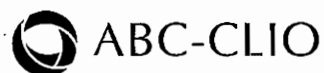


# Encyclopedia of Religion and Film

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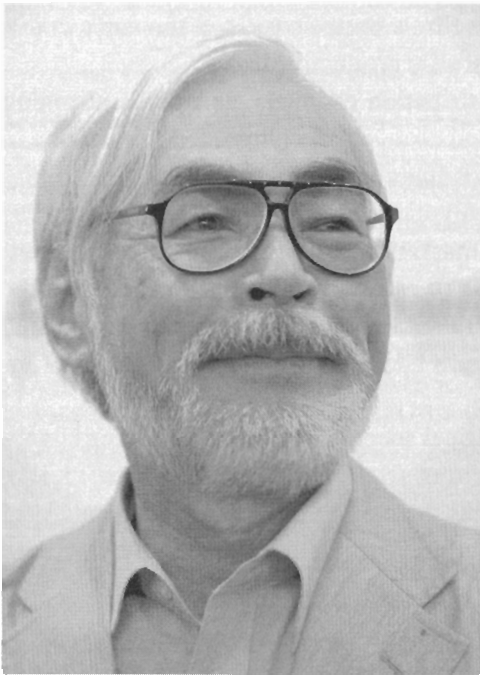
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## Miyazaki, Hayao (1941–)

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Hayao Miyazaki is Japan’s most successful director of animated films (*anime*). Though largely unknown to western audiences prior to the success of *Mononoke*



Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki at the Venice Film Festival, 2005. AP Photo/Domenico Stinellis.

*Hime (Princess Mononoke, 1997)*, Miyazaki’s animated films have gained critical acclaim while smashing box office records in his native Japan since the formation of his Studio Ghibli in the mid-1980s. His Academy-award-winning *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi (Spirited Away, 2000)* remains the highest-grossing Japanese film of all time.

To begin, it should be noted that any attempt to locate specific aspects of Japanese religion in the *anime* of Miyazaki founders upon the very notion of “Japanese religion”; more specifically, there is a fine line between aspects of Japanese religion and what might simply be called Japanese “culture” or “values.” At the same time, it may not be purely incidental that the very term *anime*

comes (via the English “animation”) from the Latin root for “soul” (*anima*), which also provides the root for the word *animism*, a form of religion based on the worship of nature and ancestor spirits. Shinto, usually called Japan’s indigenous religion, is largely animistic, and it is this bedrock of animism that one finds in Miyazaki’s works.

Although rarely religious in theme, Miyazaki’s stories are frequently based on a bedrock of what might be called “folk religiosity”—in particular, the tensions inherent in what Japanese scholar Sakaki Shoten has called the animistic–shamanistic complex, categorized by a tension between *kami* (spirits) that should be approached with reverence and thanks (*okagesama*) and those that should be feared because of their power to curse (*tatari*). In Miyazaki’s films, however, the line between these two is often blurred, so that the seemingly vicious *kami* are often the ones who must be approached with reverence and thanks, in order to calm their rage and reassert the proper order of things. Both *Kaze no tani no Naushika* (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, 1984), and *Mononoke* begin with scenes of rage-filled *tatarigami* attacking humans, and both films conclude with the pacification of spirits bent on the destruction of human civilization.

Another common theme in Miyazaki’s films is the ambiguity of good and evil. This is in stark contrast to the vast majority of U.S. comics and animated films, which generally have clearly demarcated lines between the good guys and the bad guys. Although the films tend to be bildungsromans (coming-of-age stories) and thus have a fairly clear “hero” (or in a majority of the films, heroine), the struggles of the main characters are rarely if ever fought against a single monolithic enemy but rather against individuals or groups who are going through their own struggles and have more than a few redeeming qualities of their own. The web of relationships is constantly changing, as one-time foes become friends or vice versa. Indeed, it sometimes seems as though Miyazaki is intentionally deconstructing the good–evil divide, perhaps most obviously in the complex motives driving the various colorful characters in *Mononoke*.

Finally, Miyazaki’s films—especially the epics *Nausicaä* and *Mononoke*—revel in their own complex causality, in which the attempt to eliminate bad situations often leads to a recognition that nothing is as “black and white” as it first appears. As in Buddhism, all sentient beings—even the gods and spirits—are caught up in an intricate web or interrelation, an appreciation of which softens moral divisions and judgment even as it reinforces the necessity of cooperation. Any resolution that takes place in the films is more often than not based on recognition of the legitimacy of alternative perspectives.

Miyazaki’s second film as director and first as writer, *Nausicaä*, is also the one that made him a household name in Japan. Based on his own series of *manga* (comics), the film tells a story of a Nausicaä, young princess, who inhabits a future

world—a postapocalyptic dystopia brought on by human pollution and troubled by constant warfare between the “great powers.” Along with the later *Mononoke*, *Nausicaä* has an ecological message yet does not prey to an idealized view of a pristine world totally free from human technology. Even the paradisaical Valley of the Wind relies on fire and machinery; what is sought is less an elimination of human technology than a proper balance between civilization and nature.

Nausicaä herself, like San/Mononoke, is a spirited and purpose-driven young woman who is both a skilled fighter and a friend of the animals, even the terrible giant insects called *Ohmu* (literally “king of insects,” but resonant with the mystical Buddhist *aum* syllable) who protect and spread the poisonous Sea of Decay, snuffing out the warring human civilizations one by one. In a classic Miyazaki twist, Nausicaä discovers that it is the horrible *Ohmu*, along with the other insects and poisonous trees and plants, who are the secret protectors of life. By the end of the film, Nausicaä emerges as the resurrected messiah whom legends predicted would “reunite with the earth” and bring people together to the “Blue Pure Land” (*aoki seijō no chi*)—an eschatology with echoes of Judeo-Christian as well as popular Japanese Buddhist belief. (The largest of all Buddhist sects in Japan since the Kamakura period has been the *Jōdo* or Pure Land school, and the notion of a Buddhist messiah can be found in the ancient Mahayana belief in Maitreya or Miroku, the future buddha). Interestingly, Miyazaki eventually came to regret the overtly religious aspect of this final scene.

Despite the *kami*-like nature of the title character, Miyazaki once noted that *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbor Totoro*, 1988) had no religious significance. Much less epic in scope than *Nausicaä* or *Mononoke*, *Totoro*—like his later *Spirited Away*—presents the world from the point of a view of children and evokes nostalgia for a simpler time when humans interacted with the spirit-filled natural world. As in *Tenku no Shiro Rapyuta* (*Castle in the Sky*, 1986), here too a massive tree plays the role of a protector and source of vital power—in this case the tree is the home of the *totoros*, harmless, playful nature spirits that can be seen only by the innocent eyes of children and who can be called on for help in times of need. The Buddhist bodhisattva figure Jizō—protector of children—also appears throughout the film in the form of small statues. Along with the appearance of *shimboku*—sacred trees identified with a straw rope (*shimenawa*) as powerful *kami*—these provide the film with a realistic backdrop of rural Japan.

The most overtly religious of Miyazaki’s films—and the most complex in terms of its portrayal of the relationships between various *kami* and human beings—*Princess Mononoke* tells the story of the young prince Ashitaka of the Emishi tribe (a real ethnic/cultural group who, similar to the still-existing Ainu, were conquered and absorbed by the expanding Yamato clans in the medieval

period). Set during the transition between the medieval and early modern periods in Japan, the background story is a clash between humans, intent of technology and development, and the wild *kami* of the forest who stand in their way. Yet things are more complex than this simple dichotomy might suggest. Leading the battle are a trio of huge wolf gods, accompanied by a feral human girl—San or Mononoke (literally “possessed princess”)—who wants to destroy the humans, in particular her forsworn enemy and alter ego, the poised and powerful Lady Eboshi, leader of Iron Town.

While Ashitaka’s (and Miyazaki’s) sympathies lean towards the *kami* and San, a peek inside life in Iron Town suggests that Eboshi is a fair and benevolent ruler who goes out of her way to help prostitutes and lepers, those shunned by “normal” society. The wild gods are themselves divided (the apes, wolves, and boars all having different motivations and strategies for fighting the humans), and the wolves in particular display what can only be called a taste for blood. The only character in the film that is fairly consistently “evil” is the cynical rogue Jiko, who happens to be a Buddhist monk, as well as a representative of the Mikado (Yamato Emperor). At the other end of the spectrum, the elusive and mysterious Forest God (*shishigami*), a kind of master *kami* who appears in the form of a deer, is endowed with powers of fertility, but also destruction, as becomes readily apparent upon his transformation into the Nightwalker (*didaribotchi*). Finally, there are the *kodama*—tiny luminous sprites who appear and disappear throughout the forest—claimed by Miyazaki to be the most successful of his efforts to portray what he called the depth, mystery, and “awe-inspiringness” of a forest.” Prince Ashitaka attempts, with varied success, to balance the needs and desires of all these figures. Once again, it is harmony that is valued, over and above justice.

If *Mononoke* explores the *tatari* or “curse” element of Shinto, with a focus on the shamanistic roots of Japanese religion, *Spirited Away* brings us more directly into the *okagesama* side of Shinto animism as well as the significance of purification, which in Shinto implies both physical and spiritual cleansing. Trapped in a nighttime netherworld of the spirits, the young Chihiro watches as her gluttonous parents literally turn to pigs before her eyes. Her quest to set them free from the curse leads her to take a job at the bathhouse for the spirits, run by the irascible old witch Yubaba and her helper Haku. Along the way, Chihiro—now called Sen, her real name being “stolen” by Yubaba—meets with a wondrous array of gods, spirits, and creatures (in Japanese, *yaoyorozu no kamisama*), ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous: dragons, frog-servants, slug-maids, river *kami*, *kami* of vegetation, and even a “stink spirit” (*kusarigami*) who, after bathing, turns out to be the powerful *kami* of a very polluted river. Most intriguing of all is an ambiguous and (literally) shadowy masked spirit called No Face (*kao nashi*), who tries

to buy Chihiro's friendship and, after being rebuffed, ends up leaving a path of destruction in his wake. Finally, in typical Miyazaki fashion, No Face settles down to become a silent partner of Chihiro and helper of Yubaba's twin Zeniba.

The notion of a bathhouse for spirits is not so far fetched. Miyazaki took inspiration from a Japanese rural solstice tradition in which the *kami* are invited by villagers of certain towns to enter their houses for a bath. Moreover, the bathhouse reinforces the aspect of purification that holds such a significant place in Shinto belief and ritual. Ritual purification in Shinto—which often involves some sort of physical cleansing—conditions one's heart/spirit (*kokoro*) in order that one may more readily cultivate sincerity (*makoto*) in dealing with others. Significant in Miyazaki's vision is the fact that the *kami*, from highest to lowest, must go through the same cleansing process as ordinary humans—indeed, the bath-house guests and staff are clearly prey to the negative human emotions of greed, pride, anger, and so on. Chihiro's own self-development in the film is not simply a matter of gaining courage or confidence but also of learning to be unselfish, sincere, and caring in her relations with those around her, whether *kami* or human.

By the time he made *Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki's earlier disavowal of religious influence in his films had withered away. Although these two films—which happen to be his two most successful works—do not concern themselves with the institutional forms of Shinto or Buddhism, they do represent attempts by Miyazaki to re-envision some core elements of Japanese folk religiosity.

*James Mark Shields*

**See also:** Animated Films; Buddhism; Dystopia; Japan; Kurosawa, Akira; Miyazaki, Hayao; Mizoguchi, Kenji; Ozu, Yasujirō.

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