

# The use of paul wells concept in spirited away, the movie

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Animation is derived from the Latin term *animare*, meaning “to give life to”; animated film is created by the illusion of movement over time using various techniques, effectively infusing the inanimate with “spirit” (Wells, 3).

Animation has particular ways of telling stories using image, sound, and narrative, distinguishing itself from live-action and other mediums. This essay will analyze the characters and a few of the themes, motifs, and symbols in the animated film *Spirited Away* while incorporating three major concepts that Paul Wells addresses in his novel *Understanding Animation: realism, acting and performing, and choreography*.

Unlike live-action film, animation is created through drawings from the imagination. By principle, animated films challenge the theory of “realism”. While many will argue that animation is fake because the characters are birthed from the animator’s imagination and are not real-life people, and therefore unable to portray reality, Paul Wells will argue that realism can, in fact, be captured in animated films: “Any definition of “reality” is necessarily subjective. Any definition of “realism” as it operates within any image-making practice is also open to interpretation,” (Wells, 24). Although animated films defy the surface-level definition of realism, it would be unfair to dismiss these films as simply unrealistic. In fact, with animators’ free range to create any world they desire, they have the ability to challenge our everyday reality and portray any reality that is limited only by the imagination. Wells notes that:

“Svankmajer’s view probably best articulates the real possibilities available to the animator, in the sense that he stresses how animation can redefine

the everyday, subvert our accepted notions of “reality”, and challenge the orthodox understanding and acceptance of our existence. Animation can defy the laws of gravity, challenge our perceived view of space and time, and endow lifeless things with dynamic and vibrant properties,” (Wells, 11).

One way the film *Spirited Away* both challenges and portrays our notion of reality is by addressing the real-life scenario of a coming-of-age story while incorporating mythical or supernatural entities as a norm in this world.

Entering the adult world is a substantial and shocking transition for some of the characters. Idleness is a luxury of childhood—Chihiro lies in the backseat while her parents drive, and Boh lies among soft pillows while his mother goes about her daily business. Neither Chihiro nor Boh are capable of doing anything independently, nor does either know how to effectively ask for what they want. Whining and complaining are the methods they know best, but, for Chihiro at least, these have no place in the spirit world. When Chihiro becomes Sen and starts her job at the bathhouse, she works idly and ineffectively. Lin correctly suspects that Sen has never worked a day in her life. Sen gradually learns to keep up: she works diligently and even undertakes the monumental task of washing the stink spirit until its true river spirit form emerges. Though hard work is not the only element of the spirit world that transforms Sen into a stronger, more capable person, it certainly helps her learn to deal with problems maturely—a skill required in the adult world. While Sen's abrupt transition into the work field accurately shows the hard work and responsibilities that come with being an adult in the real world, the fantasy world of spirits are normalized in this film. The

normalization of this reality is achieved through the characters' interaction with the spirits—in particular, Lin, Haku, and the rest of the humans at the bathhouse that interact with the spirits as if it were normal. As audience members, we accept the notion that spirits are a part of this film's reality simply because the characters in this narrative treat them as so, therefore supporting Wells' argument about how animation can “ redefine the everyday, subvert our accepted notions of “ reality”, and challenge the orthodox understanding and acceptance of our existence.”

It is through the characters' acting that makes us accept spirits and other monsters into our reality—at least while we are engaged in watching this film. Although acting and performing are usually associated with human actors and actresses in live-action films, in his novel *Understanding Animation*, Wells argues that animated characters also act and perform in animated films. He states, ““ Acting” in the animated film is an intriguing concept in the sense that it properly represents the relationship between the animator and the figure, object or environment he/she is animating. The animator must essentially use the techniques employed by the actor to project the specificities of character throughout the mechanistic process of the animation itself. In fact, the animator must consider all the possibilities available to the actor in order to create and develop “ character” long before the actual process of animation begins,” (Wells, 104).

The animator of this film, Hayao Miyazaki, acts both as the director and actor. He directs characters in the film by drawing them how he sees fit while simultaneously acting the characters out. Like an actor in live-action films,

Miyazaki develops the characters from scripts, taking into consideration the narrative implications of the role in the determination of character designs, characters' range of movements, and characters' traits or motivations. This can be seen with the character of Haku. Haku first appears as a boy of about sixteen years old, but he is actually a lost river spirit that can also take the form of a white dragon. In his guise as a white dragon, his appearance suggests a river: flowing and graceful. The fluidity of his body as he flies in the air, like in the scene where he is being chased by the enchanted flying paper birds, mimics the smooth movements of the river from which he belongs. There are even moments when he dives into the water in his effort to escape his attackers, and he almost seems to blend in with the river, posing as a wave cutting through the water. This is an important aspect of his character as his individual journey in the film centers around his recollection of his former self; his relationship with water builds upon his character and acts as a foreshadow as we later find out that he is the spirit of the Kohaku River. As Haku, however, he is not always so composed, and he exhibits both bravery and sadness. The river he once represented, was drained and paved over to build an apartment complex, and Haku is truly a lost soul with no home. Though he has made a home of sorts at the bathhouse, he knows he once had another home, and the loss of it haunts him. The animator illustrates this through the solemn and serious faces he often wears throughout the film—one that is very different from that of Chihiro who is portrayed as a character that is very expressive.

Haku's relationship with Chihiro is also worth analyzing: Haku's treatment of Chihiro is sometimes kind but other times not—when Haku first sees Chihiro on the bridge, he practically yells at her to leave because she does not belong there at the bathhouse, then he takes care of her as she is physically disappearing by providing her food in order to regain her complete self back. Chihiro later learns that Yubaba controls him through a slug she planted inside him, explaining his occasional outbursts towards her and his stealing of a pendant that belongs to Yubaba's sister. And while Haku may seem powerful at times, he is also weak—he cannot remember his name, which means he can never leave the spirit world especially while he is under Yubaba's control. This is where Haku's kindness toward Chihiro serves him to his advantage. Sen deviates momentarily from her quest to rescue her parents to save Haku when he is hurt, as Haku once saved her from drowning in the Kohaku River when she was a little girl. He and Sen develop a loyal and deep friendship, and love each other like brother and sister. Since Haku cannot remember who he really is, he must rely on Sen to remember, and his kindness makes her determined to do so. Sen eventually does find Haku's true identity, which gives Haku the power to free himself from the spirit world and Yubaba's control. The scene where Sen recalls the specific memory of Haku saving her as a little girl in the Kohaku River brilliantly portrays Haku's freedom. In this scene, Sen is flying with Haku in his white dragon form, and the moment she realizes that his name must be Kohaku River, his scales begin to shed off, which can be interpreted to symbolize the breaking of the chains that bind Haku to Yubaba and the spirit world. He then turns into human form, and he and Sen float down to the ground gracefully.

Although we never learn Haku's ultimate fate, by the end of the movie he has at the very least found a measure of freedom and peace.

While acting is a major part in this film, just as important is the choreography. In fact, these two concepts cannot be present without the other especially in animated films. Even in the description above about the excellent acting and performing in this film, the interaction of the characters among themselves and their surroundings is choreography. " Hundreds of animated films can provide evidence of good " acting", but even more can illustrate the prominence of the dynamics of movement itself as a narrative principle," (Wells, 111). According to Wells, motion is the most important aspect in film and argues that movement of characters or objects alone can act as its own narrative—even without the help of scripts. There are many moments in the film where dialogue can be absent and yet the plot can still be interpreted by the audience. For example, if we take out the audio and simply watch the scene where Chihiro is looking for her parents in the abandoned amusement park, we can see a sense of urgency in Chihiro through her facial expression and body movements. Her widened eyes, gaped mouth, and quick movements mimic those of a panicked child in real life, and it can be assumed that her sense of urgency stems from the absence of her parents because a child her age is most likely not comfortable with being alone in a strange or unfamiliar place. Through the careful choreography of Chihiro's movements designed by the animator Miyazaki, it is possible to understand the events in the scene even with the absence of a script. Keep in mind, however, that what makes good acting

and an impressive performance by the actors in the film is the delivery of speech and the motions that come with it. While the motions on the screen articulate the narrative, the actors are what make the film come to life.

Another scene where choreography acts as its own narrative in *Spirited Away* is when the stink spirit enters the bathhouse. The scene displays a blob-like figure dripping pieces of itself as it crawls through the lobby seeking for service. And although motion picture does not have smell, the illusion that the creature is emitting an awful stench is emulated by the vision that is the stink spirit as well as the reactions that the other characters in the scene provide. Neighboring shop owners close their doors and blinds to protect themselves from the repugnant odor as the stink spirit makes its way to the bathhouse. When it enters, the other workers cover their mouths and scramble to get out of the room. Chihiro's facial expression and hair go rigid as she attempts to talk to the stink spirit with a clenched mouth. Chihiro leads it to the biggest bath, and throughout the whole service, she looks painfully disgusted by its stench but is determined to clean the customer thoroughly. She goes through a lot of trouble to replenish the stink spirit, pulling out different objects imbedded in it. Chihiro pulls out a sword from its side, as well as a wheel that seems to be attached to a wagon or bike, a large pole, and other miscellaneous objects. After a while, Chihiro completes her job and the spirit is rejuvenated. One interpretation of this scene views the stink spirit as a river god that is so heavily-injured with pollution that it comes to the bathhouse seeking for and ultimately finding rejuvenation (SparkNotes). The choreography in this scene is accompanied by little



dialogue exchanged by the actors proving Wells' idea that choreography, when constructed properly, can act as a narrative medium on its own.

An in-depth analysis of the animated film *Spirited Away* provides us with much evidence to support a select few of Paul Wells' theories he mentions in his novel *Understanding Animation*, including realism, acting and performing, and choreography. Although the animated world is viewed as fake because it is only real in the imagination, animated films are capable of capturing reality in their own creative way. Wells reminds us that there is freedom in the interpretation of "realism", and that animated films have the ability to convey a real-life situation through creative expression and that the use of imagination does in no way make the film less realistic. While *Spirited Away* incorporates mythical creatures, this does not take away from real-life scenario of the transition into the adult world that Chihiro has to face in order to rescue her parents. Chihiro's acting and captivating performance in this film influences the audience in accepting her version of reality where spirits and other creatures are a part of the norm. As strange as it may be to consider a cartoon character an actor, Wells points out the parallel between the two: just like a live-action film actor, the character in an animated film develops his character through script and choreography. Many scenes portray the actors' characters through rich illustration centered around expressions, movements, and interactions with surrounding. As the main characters in the film, Chihiro and Haku's character developments are seen most abundantly. Chihiro is depicted as a spoiled child at the beginning of the film, constantly whining when she was afraid or could not get her way—

like when she was scared to explore the abandoned amusement park with her parents—but by then end, one of the last close ups of her face show her in deep concentration as she is instructed to pick out the pigs that were said to be her parents. She cleverly realizes that none of the pigs are her parents, and with that she and her parents are set free. Haku also finds his freedom at the end of the film through his revelation of his former identity with the help of Chihiro. As seemingly dynamic characters, some may argue otherwise, recognizing Chihiro's stubbornness that characterized her both as stubborn in the beginning and brave at the end; and the foreshadow that Haku employed in his white dragon form that suggested a river by his fluid motions both in air and in water throughout the entirety of the film.