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More Than Just A Bowl of Ramen: Studio Ghibli's Food of Semiotic Significance

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*Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com***ABSTRACT**

Studio Ghibli, a Japanese animation film studio that is often referred to as 'Japan's Dream Factory', is known to have produced the best animation movies. Their movies are famous for their magnetic pull towards an alternate reality; a reality that most of us are promised through their fantastical world, equipped with realistic animation and heart-tugging dialogues. However, despite all of its animation and plots, their movies have managed to make us feel at home with their depictions of food. A quick browse with the keywords 'Studio, Ghibli' will leave one with a countless number of compilations of Ghibli's famous animations of food. Through the research paper, the researcher will attempt to understand what it is about Studio Ghibli's animated dishes that manage to play an important role in the movie. The research paper will attempt to prove that the animations of food portrayed in the movies are more than just an aesthetic prop, made to make our mouths water. In order to understand the relationship between food and the meaning of the text, in this case, visual, one needs to understand the semiotics of food and the role it plays in a particular context. Food, in a text, should not be restricted to the perception of survival and nourishment. Inherently, food plays an important role in the sign system. This would include many aspects like the gustatory perception and how this reflects in the physiological level or how table manners are a reflection of the socio-political conditions prevalent during that period of time. Hereby, one can understand how food plays the role of a sign that expresses a socio-cultural identity.

In the following research paper, the researcher will be using the theory of semiotics by Roland Barthes in order to understand the structure of meaning-making that is embedded in the animation process of the food items. This will include an understanding of how the semiotics play a larger role in the audience's perception of Japanese culture with relation to food or their understanding of the movie. Through this research paper, the researcher hopes to establish an understanding as to how the intricate details that most Studio Ghibli movies possess helps shape our understanding of the circumstances prevalent in the setting of the movie. The researcher insists on showing how a delicious looking bowl of ramen is more than just an aesthetic dish.

Keywords: Studio, Ghibli, Aesthetic, Semiotics, food, Japanese, cuisine

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Quick Response Code:

Received on 20/02/2019
Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved



Introduction

Subversiveness is a quality that most people appreciate in texts, movies and images. It opens a door to interpretation that is likely to help us peek into the messages that the author or the creator is trying to imply. In most instances, we observe materialistic evidence like paintings or furniture or imagery to convey a subservient message, one that we are sure that the author has veiled for a reason. Food has usually never been used as a subservient tool. However, in the case of Studio Ghibli, the tables have seemed to turn. Studio Ghibli has always been commended for its exuberant display of characters in their utopias. Studio Ghibli movies have helped pave a path to imagining fantastical worlds where houses can talk and move and they manage to lull us into a stretch of tranquil. All Studio Ghibli movies have been praised for their ability to hold our attention: they are slow paced with no rush to detail in a way that we are forced to confront the realness of the animation. The movies never pay much attention to the whoosh of wind and the effect it has on a girl's hair as she is running down the hill to meet her lover. Instead, Studio Ghibli movies prefer to focus on the moments of doubt, of pure confusion, observance wherein the girl will pause, her eyes blinking rapidly to take in her surroundings. Maybe, she will straighten her wrinkled frock and adjust her socks for comfort. It is in these moments that Studio Ghibli manages to gain attention. Among many aspects shown in their movie like the portrayal of females and the usage of magical realism, people have come to focus on an aspect that Studio Ghibli pays a lot of attention to, Food. Since when has food played a pivotal role in being subversive?

In order to understand the aforementioned question, the primary texts chosen to elaborate on the semiotics of food are *Howl's Moving Castle* (Miyazaki, 2004), *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001) and *My Neighbour Totoro* (Miyazaki, 1998). The movies deal with food in different facets but ultimately, it comes under an umbrella in understanding that food does not serve the sole purpose of nourishment. Eagleton explains the semiotics of food by pointing out how: "If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food . . . Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as a gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation." Through this, one understands that food no longer serves the sole purpose of subsistence and sustenance. Instead, it becomes a signifier of culture, values and emotions. Most Studio Ghibli movies depict Japan and its culture. Japanese cuisine has been enjoyed all over the world due to globalisation. Sushi has become a staple luxury piece in most countries around the world due to globalisation. In addition to this, popular culture that is comprised of anime and mangas have helped illustrate Japanese culture to an extent of portraying how the culture percolates into the lives of people and how it influences their actions. Before exploring the semiotics of food in Studio Ghibli movies, it's important to understand why food is placed in a high pedestal. Food can be seen as a form of communication between ritual and culture. Food is our expressions of life, love, grief, tradition and much more.

Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics will be employed to understand the meaning-making process that's intricately intertwined in the illustrations of food. Barthes on the semiotics of food: "For what is food? It is not only a collection of products . . . It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour." Barthes believes that food is a sign and it functions in communicating something more than what it is depicting. With food, one is engaging with a whole system of meanings. Buying an apple would not indicate buying a fruit. Inherently, it would mean engaging with a whole system that helped contribute to the production of the apple. This is the signification of food wherein the apple could indicate Snow White, purity, Macintosh, wealth and so on. In his text, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption", Barthes points out how the consideration of food as merely insignificant is false as it portrays a system. This system is ultimately held by a pole called culture. In this instance, a cupcake is a dessert that is often used as a term of endearment in Europe. The endearment has no relation to the food in itself but most of Western society chooses to identify that calling someone 'cupcake' indicates a sense of

propinquity. However, this is not practiced in Asia. Doing so would be considered absurd. This tells us a lot about the culture of a place and how it helps in creating one's identity. Just like clothes, wherein one is distinguished on the basis of their occupation and status in society, food manages to convey a lot about the consumer.

In *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), food is seen to be sacred as it is a recurring theme. All life changing decisions seem to revolve around food. In one instance, food and greed have an undeniable link. The movie begins to develop as Chihiro, the protagonist, goes along with her parents to the food stand. Her parents, upon seeing that they get to consume large amounts of food without paying for it, sits to gorging down food - more than what they need. When Chihiro returns, she spots her parents, except they are no longer humans. Instead, they are pigs. It is no news to us that the Japanese culture ultimately boils down to one term: Respect.

Chihiro: "Let's go back, we're going to get in trouble..."

Dad: "It's okay. I have my credit card and some cash."

Japanese people believe that food should be treated with respect and one should not indulge in the act of eating for the sake of it. Itadakimasu and gochisosama are terms that are uttered before and after the meal in order to show their respect and appreciation to the food being served. This traces back to Shinto, an indigenous faith of the Japanese wherein the Shinto gods called Kami are present as spirits and take the form of air, water, food, forests, etc. In an interview, Miyazaki points out how the belief in kami, although rare today, helps one realise how they should treasure everything they own because of the possibility that spirits exist there. This belief comes from the root of understanding that there is life to everything. Chihiro is warned by Haku to eat the food in the spirit world or else, she would disappear. Here, we see how food acts as a magnifying force, pulling her down to her place. Thanks to globalisation, we are often in places other than our own and eating food that our palate is not used to. This could be Miyazaki's way of saying that despite all the forces that keep the Western culture as dominant, it is one's food that helps bring them back to their culture.

Gluttony, as the movie shows, is not an admirable trait in Japan. After the Second World War, Japan experienced an economic boom wherein it leaned toward capitalism and consumerism, thereby forgetting their traditional ways. As her parents devour the food before them, it is interesting to note how there are no vegetables. Vegetables work within the system that is signified through keywords like health, humility, love for animals and more. Her parents do not stop to think about why the food is available at a large amount with no supervision. It is almost like their vision is clouded by the lust to consume more food, powered by the fact that it is free. In addition to this, her parents turning into pigs goes beyond the popular saying, "You are what you eat." Pigs are a critical symbol of the capitalistic culture that would soon swallow tradition and influence mankind to work towards a consumerist culture and to become more materialistic. In another scene, we see a bathhouse furnace which is shaped like a pig that constantly gobbles away at resources to help emit a more temperate bubble bath. The character No Face, an ambiguous creature is portrayed to be one that demands food in return for the gold coins he has. He goes on to devour many people and proceeds to get bigger and bigger as limbs pop out of his body. Here, the fact that he blows up the more he eats is a clear depiction of the lack of concern in the food being consumed. Greed has become an overarching influence in many people's lives and it can be traced from their relationship to food which follows the same trajectory as money. Going back to the phrase, "you are what you eat," No Face seems to replicate what he eats, going to the extent of talking like them. It is only when Chihiro gives him an emetic dumpling (given to her by a River God) that he reduces in size. This also portrays the growing rate of obesity around the world. However, aside from greed and its consequences, food proves to be a source of comfort in the movie. When Chihiro was going through her mental breakdown, she is offered rice balls by Haru in an attempt to cheer her up. As we can see, in *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki 2001), Miyazaki succeeds in conveying the importance of food and how it manages to change one's world.

Howl's Moving Castle (Miyazaki, 2004) revolves around the character, Sophie who goes on an adventure where she meets people with unique traits. The movie consists of a talking flame, a flighty young man, a young boy and an ageing woman. They have their differences as there are constant misunderstandings between them. Calcifer, a flame and a beating heart manage to function as the glue of the shambling house. It is his warm and boisterous personality that helps keep the jovial atmosphere of the house. Consequently, this helps inculcate an interest in food. The last thing for a person in a war-torn country to think about is a feast. Yet, they manage to prepare a feast whenever one is in need of food. In this movie, food is portrayed to help develop the characters. Food is more than just a commodity. Instead, it helps stitch a blanket of life wherein it's held together by love and care. Howl, initially portrayed as a vain and flighty character, develops into a caring person. This is shown in the way he prepares his breakfast. Miyazaki pays attention to the fact that he does not just cook breakfast for himself. It is big enough for everyone in the house. As the movie begins, we see Sophie lost and miserable. This is illustrated in the food she eats. She chooses to eat a plain meal of bread and cheese. Later, this would reflect her practical sense in a different context. However, Miyazaki is known for paying attention to detail. The sombre mood of the scene is paid attention to because of her choice of food. In a way, it reflects her state of mind at that moment.

It is interesting to see how the castle floats around in a place that is burning with the potential of waging war and yet, through food, they manage to retain their place of comfort that is often compromised due to war. Although the movie isn't set in Japan, it carries the Japanese tradition of eating together. This is illustrated when Sophie moves into Howl's castle after having met with Calcifer and Markl. Sophie asks Markl why he doesn't want bacon and eggs to which he explains how only Howl can cook using Calcifer. On a surface level, this might indicate how Howl has a dominating personality that curbs one's freedom to be themselves in the house. However, if one takes in the context and looks into the signification of food, it can be understood that no one is allowed to eat a meal without the entire family present. Going back to the idea of war, the aesthetics of the food creates a sense of warmth within the viewer that despite the chaos in the outside world, a sense of belonging can exist as long as people stay together. The monotonous and dreary act of preparing breakfast becomes an important aspect in analysing family dynamics.

Rohit Chopra, in his essay, *Comic Books and the Culinary Logic of Late Capitalism* points out how food has always served as a symbol of authentic human bonds; one that supersedes capital. It helps build one's identity. Since Howl's cooking is simple and yet it feels like a feast with the bacon crackling and the eggs cooked to perfection, one understands that he is beyond his cowardice. The movie uses almost no dialogue to paint the characters in a good light. The main characters like Howl, Sophie and Calcifer are painted through their actions and the food they make. For instance, Sophie's choices of food reflect her practicability. Her bread and cheese are indications of how she does not have time to think about the grandeur of her food. According to Chopra, food can be an act of violence and unity. The concept of food being an act of violence is a novel one as food is mostly connected with subsistence and nutrition. However, food is also the taking of life. Food is brought about by terminating one's life in order to sustain another's. Using this idea, the concept of Hunger in *Howl's Moving Castle* is bifurcated. On one hand, it means to consume in order to sustain. This concept is explored in the aforementioned paragraph. On the other hand, it reflects one's desire to possess. Miyazaki's image of war is characterised by flames enveloping cities and governments casting a blind eye to its impact. However, let's look at the characterisation of fire.

Miyazaki portrays fire in the form of two qualities: Friendly and Fury. Calcifer, a small-sized friendly flame is always characterised with a smile, perpetually gobbles at wood to keep himself alive. Fire is mostly seen as a symbol of chaos. However, Calcifer proves to go beyond this and establishes himself as someone who is saner than Howl, a human. Calcifer is responsible for the lives in the house as he helps provide food and fuel to keep the castle moving. The movie has

shots of Calcifer dancing around the food, his mouth spread wide into a smile as he helps heat up the aesthetically portrayed food. In terms of fury, fire plays a symbol of gluttony; of men wanting more than they have wherein they attack and steal the resources from the neighbouring countries. It is interesting to see how in one aspect, fire helps provide food that inherently helps keep a family together but at the same time, it manages to tear families apart.

My Neighbour Totoro (Miyazaki, 1988) does not deal with themes like gluttony and war. It's a simple tale about a family who moves to the countryside so that they can be near their mother. There are no climaxes or denouements. The movie possesses rich illustrations of food and the countryside. Let us take a closer look at the signification process that the food plays in the movie. The movie throws light on the ideal childhood, one that is not governed by overbearing parents with the constant threat of punishment. Instead, there needs to be free reign over actions and thoughts for children to grow and develop. When Satsuki and Mei move to the countryside with their father, the viewers are introduced to the sudden shift in scenery. With a focus on scenery and peace, the children have time to imagine and pay respect to tradition. The picture painted is of beautiful countryside with an absence of rush. In this movie, we see family dynamics play an important role. For instance, Satsuki, the older sister, takes the responsibility of preparing the food. She prepares the food and puts it into bento which is a traditional home-packed meal that is quite common in Japan. We do not see a sulking child who is forced to prepare food for her family. Instead, Miyazaki illustrates how being in the countryside and constantly engaging with nature helps cultivate the value for family and resources. This runs along with the Japanese cultural belief wherein children should help their parents. The food she prepares depicts the simple life of the countryside. This allows us to peek into the post World War II era (as the movie takes place in 1958). There is also a sense of nostalgia to remind the Japanese people what they have lost due to capitalism and globalisation. Although it seems like the movie idealises it, it is clear that the emphasis on how the shift to modernisation has resulted in a drastic shift of values and tradition.

In Myrte E. Hamburg's paper, "Food for Love", she points out how although food is a human being's primitive need, more than fulfilling one's gustatory needs, it influences one's physiological and emotional state as well. Totoros, the main characters in the film, are the figments of the children's imagination. In one instance, as they are running away from Mei, they make sure to take their bundle of food with them. This particular action could mean many things like scarcity of food or reverence of food. In another instance, Totoro gives a very small portion of its food to thank the girls. When Satsuki offers her umbrella to it, Totoro offers them nuts and seeds which, when planted, sprouts into a huge tree. This is inadvertently a metaphor for an innocent and fantastical friendship. Miyazaki elaborates on how food is more than a taste for children. It's an emotive response to incidents wherein they can't express their feelings in words (as they are children) as best as they can. Their safe bet is to exchange food because that is a universal understanding of gratitude.

In another instance, food is used to indicate the geography of the area. The movie shows how people in the countryside soaked their fruits and vegetables into the river and once it cooled down, the kids enjoyed it with their family. Although this might seem like a mundane detail, it shows the simplicity of life back then. This brings us to another question: Why does that matter? In spite of the fact that the preferred audience for the movie is children, Miyazaki is aware that adults are going to be watching it as well. Watching the movie as adults often leaves us feeling a sense of nostalgia and that is because we are reliving our childhood through the characters. This is exemplified through food. As adults, we do not take the time to appreciate the freshness of fruits or the burst of an orange peel as we pop it into our mouths. We do not see food as an expression of gratitude. Instead, it is a source of nourishment and subsistence. In addition to this, the concept of eating with one's family has almost become a myth because of how busy most people are. When someone's sick, we rush to get them a Get Well Soon card, unlike Mei who gets corn for her mother. She makes sure not to lose it even when she gets lost. This seems highly unrealistic for a child to, which is, to remain focused on their belonging during a moment of tension. However, this signifies how despite how much fun Mei and Satsuki have every day, the thought that

their mother is sick constantly haunts them and because they are children, they do not know to express it.

In conclusion, Studio Ghibli movies do not aestheticise food to get our stomachs rumbling and our mouths drooling. Studio Ghibli movies are fueled by nostalgia. Viewers are constantly at a loss of words when they observe the amount of detail put into the illustration of food which was not a new concept to us as children. As children, a great amount of detail is paid to food to understand how it makes us feel instead of how much it costs and its nutritious value. Movies like *Spirited Away* manage to make us stop and think about how food has become a symbol of the evils that we are constantly trying to fight against capitalism and materialism. It helps us understand that food can work as a bridge to fix relationships. Howl's *Moving Castle* points out how identity is often shaped by the food we eat. It points out that in the darkest days when there's chaos raging in the outside world, as long as we are surrounded by the people we love with a pan of crackling bacon and boiled eggs, we have succeeded in securing our spot of peace. Happiness is ensured to us only if we take life a little less seriously like Satsuki and Mei who believe that food is currency. Despite coming from a metropolitan city, they do not forget to relish in the food of the countryside. It is interesting to see how food, a mundane concept, works well in a system of arbitrary themes like gluttony, war, green, capitalism, etc. Peace does not always work in the binary with war. As busy adults, a moment of peace is a rare commodity and it is possible, as Miyazaki suggests, to have it served hot in a bowl of ramen.

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