

# ถอดรหัสทุนนิยมในแอนิเมชันเรื่อง Spirited Away

## Decoding Capitalism

### in Animation of Spirited Away

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#### Abstract

One of the most recommended animations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is Spirited Away (2001). It got the highest level of ratings and even won numerous awards. The animated film contained beautifully visual arts and amazing plots that suited for all ages and also concealed some contents about the concepts of capitalism including consumerism and greed. In this study, the data were collected from the images and the dialogues in the English subtitled version of animation and the director's interview so as to

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interpret the signs involved with capitalism hidden in animation based on semiotic theory. It was found that the director added the reflections of capitalism including consumerism and greed through the settings, the characters, and the dialogues artfully.

**Keywords:** Animation, Spirited Away, Capitalism, Consumerism, Greed

## บทคัดย่อ

ภาพยนตร์แอนิเมชันเรื่อง *Spirited Away* (2001) เป็นหนึ่งในภาพยนตร์ที่ได้รับการยกย่องว่าเป็นภาพยนตร์ที่ดีที่สุดในศตวรรษที่ 21 นอกจากภาพยนตร์เรื่องนี้ได้รับคำชื่นชมและได้รับรางวัลจากหลากหลายสถาบัน ทั้งในด้านภาพที่สวยงาม เนื้อเรื่องที่ไม่น่าตื่นเต้น และความบันเทิงที่เหมาะสมกับทุกวัย แอนิเมชันเรื่องนี้ยังได้สอดแทรกเนื้อหาและบทเรียนที่เกี่ยวข้องกับระบบทุนนิยมที่รวมถึงลัทธิบริโภคนิยมและความโลภไว้อีกด้วย ข้อมูลในการศึกษาครั้งนี้ประกอบด้วยรูปภาพและบทสนทนาจากภาพยนตร์ในรูปแบบที่มีคำบรรยายภาษาอังกฤษ รวมถึงบทสัมภาษณ์ของผู้กำกับภาพยนตร์ โดยการศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับระบบทุนนิยมที่แฝงอยู่ในแอนิเมชันเรื่องนี้เป็นไปตามการศึกษาเกี่ยวกับสัญลักษณ์และภาษาสัญลักษณ์ จากการศึกษาพบว่าผู้กำกับภาพยนตร์ได้สอดแทรกภาพสะท้อนของทุนนิยมซึ่งรวมถึงลัทธิบริโภคนิยมและความโลภผ่านเรื่องราว ฉาก ตัวละคร และบทสนทนา ด้วยศิลปะอย่างแนบเนียน

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## Introduction

*Spirited Away*, or *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (original title), is a 2001 Japanese animation written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki and produced by Studio Ghibli. This fantasy animation is about Chihiro, a ten-

year-old girl, who has to make out a journey in the spirit world. The film breaks domestic box-office record and grosses over \$200 million in Japan. Moreover, it grossed total \$289 million around the world and it has been the highest grossing anime film for 15 years (Shepherd, 2017). In addition, Walt Disney Pictures and DreamWorks gets the rights to dub the film in English under the supervision of John Lasseter, the chief creative officer at Disney and a co-founder of Pixar. The processes are detailed to keep Miyazaki's original ideas so the English language version of the film must be only dubbed or subtitled. Nothing is changed and there are no cuts of any parts of the film (Brooks, Dugdale, n. d. ; 2005). Furthermore, it was voted the fourth best film of the 21st century and was the highest rank animated film on the list (Brown, 2016). The film has just been voted as one of the 25 best films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far by the chief film critics of The Times (Dargis & Scott, 2017). Furthermore, it was included as a prescribed text in the Higher School Certificate Japanese Extension course from 2009-2013 by the New South Wales Board of Studies (Cooper, 2010).

*Spirited Away* seems like an animated film for children with a fantasy theme and beautiful drawings. However, many audiences have different points of view in interpreting it. Because of its leading commentaries, there are a number of studies analyzing what is contained in this animation such as Japanese culture, Shinto perspective, political economy, the aesthetics of imagination, nostalgia, and even an examination of the lack of logic in

the film (Boyd & Nishimura, 2016; Matthews, 2006; Napier, 2006; Swale, 2015; Willmott, 2013; Yoshioka, 2014).

One of crucial points of this animated film to be considered is the relationship between Chihiro and Yubaba – the owner of the spirit bathhouse. The girl, who is only ten years old, has to work with other workers under Yubaba's control in order to survive in the spirit world. Moreover, Yubaba is the only one in the film who possesses valuable things and need not to do any labor work. This relationship between the owner of the spirit bathhouse and her workers reflects the view of capitalism as Saad-Filho (2002) states that

The capital relation implies that the means of production have been monopolised by a relatively small number of people. In contrast, the majority are forced to sell their labour power in order to purchase commodities which, as a class, they have produced previously. (p.41)

In the field of media study, the audiences are active decoders who recognize what underlying there in a film. Capitalism is one main point in this animated film that is thought-provoking for analysis. Therefore, this study aims to find out semiotic signs which are the representations of capitalism underlying in *Spirited Away*.

## Capitalism: Consumerism and Greed

According to Swedberg (2005), the dominant economic system in today's world has been capitalism. Scott (2011) defines capitalism as the “three-level system of indirect governance for economic relationships; it is a system that is political and administrative as well as economic” (p.63). The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica describes capitalism that

Capitalism, also called free market economy or free enterprise economy, economic system, dominant in the Western world since the breakup of feudalism, in which most of the means of production are privately owned and production is guided and income distributed largely through the operation of markets. (Heilbroner, 2017)

Saad-Filho (2002) describes the characteristic of capitalism as “the exploitation of the wage workers by the capitalists through the extraction of surplus value” (p.36). Moreover, capital is a social relationship in form of things between two classes. The former is capitalists who own the means of production and employ the latter who is workers in order to make profit. This also clarifies Marx's idea of ‘capital’ that “Capital is a social relation between two classes, capitalists and workers, that takes the form of things” (p.39). While Lapon (2011) states Marx's concept that exploitation forms

the foundation of the capitalist system. Working-class people sell their labor-power or their ability to work to the capitalists to gain a wage.

## Consumerism

Capitalism mainly focuses on making profits. In order to make more profits, the capitalists encourage consumers to consume more. This concept of consumption is defined as the ideology of today's world. Woodhouse (n.d.) defines consumerism in *Encyclopedia of Science, Technology, and Ethics* as "a way of life combining high levels of material affluence with an emphasis on symbolic and emotional meanings associated with shopping and possessions" (p.427). In the negative view, consumerism leads to over consumptions and environmental destruction. D'Souza (2015) states that "capitalism is driven by self-interest and the quest for profits, favors the use of a barrage of advertising for goods and services that could lead to high competition, envy and acquisitiveness" (p.4). Moreover, Stavrakakis (2006) argues that consumption, consumerism, advertising, public relations, and branding play important roles in capitalist society. In other words, capitalism is related to consumerism. Stavrakakis (2006) reveals that consumerism is not the enjoyment of the purchased objects, but it is the "enjoyment of desiring and buying" or "the pleasure of buying". The ideology of consumerism is a wealthier life that is a consequence of more production and more consumption; this ideology could be a factor restricting people's

freedom, making people dependent on others, and alienated them (Firat et al., 2013).

## **Greed**

The selfish desire for wealth and objects in consumerism is known as ‘greed’. According to D’Souza (2015), greed is described as the outcome of “dissatisfaction, emptiness, and discontentment” (p.1). This term is defined by Fromm (1939) that “Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction” and by Robertson (2013) that “Greed can be defined as the selfish desire to possess wealth, substances, objects, people, power, status, appreciation or attention far beyond what is required for basic human comfort” (D’ Souza, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, greed is extreme self-interest perceived as immoral or unacceptable (Wang et al., n.d.). It can be said that one of the impacts of capitalism and consumerism in the society is it increases people’s greed.

## **Reception theory**

Ott and Mack (2014) defines reception theory as “a diverse body of work that nevertheless commonly stresses audience interpretation as a primary source of meaning (p. 246).” Unlike the earlier beliefs that audiences are passive, reception theory states that “audiences are selective

in which media they consume and how they choose to use it” (Ott & Mack, 2014, p. 248).

Media audiences are active interpreters of media; therefore, the meaning of media texts are something that active audiences construct. Each audience with different backgrounds is likely to interpret the same media text differently. In addition, media texts are constructed according to certain codes. Media message is constructed or “encoded” by a media producer, then is decoded by audiences. Hall’s “encoding-decoding” model is described as “a method that highlights both messages and their interpretations by audiences.” Moreover, as media texts are polysemy, they can signify various meanings to members of audiences (Croteau et al., 2012; Ott & Mack, 2014). In addition, Berger (2012) identifies that meanings are socially produced and culture shapes our feeling, actions, and our identities.

According to reception theory, to identify the meaning of signs and codes underlying in *Spirited Away*, the data is analyzed based on semiotics.

## Semiotics

In order to understand the meaning underlying in a media text, semiotics is a crucial theory framing the analysis. Semiotics refers to “The study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation” (Oxford Online Dictionary, n.d.). According to Danesi (2009), semiotics aims to “study semiosis (the production and comprehension of signs) as it manifests itself

in human and non-human spheres” (p. 135). While Danesi (2009) points out that semiotics is “a discipline aiming to study sign-based behavior” (p.34).

In addition, Hall (1980) describes that media are related to signifying practices that give meaning to things and communicate the meaning to someone. The visual images are encoded in the production process in a certain cultural setting and then decoded by the viewers.

Moreover, University of St. Thomas (n.d.) illustrates the study of media and semiotics that “Media literacy practices, then, use semiotics theory to sort out the sign systems used and produced by the mass media, and to interpret what those systems mean” (p.3).

## Sign

In semiotics, ‘sign’ is defined differently by Saussure and Pierce. In Saussure’s view, a sign is a twofold entity consisted of two interrelated parts - signifier and signified, or sign-vehicle and meaning. The relation between the two is conceptual and determined by social convention. While Charles Pierce defines that ‘sign’ consists of three parts that are *representamen*, *object*, and *interpretant*. In other words, sign is something (*representamen*) that represents something (object) to somebody in some context (*interpretant*). The relation among the three dimensions is dynamic (Berger, 2012; Danesi, 2009; Eco, 1979).

Hall (1980) describes the meanings of signs that

signs appear to acquire their full ideological value – appear to be open to articulation with wider ideological discourses and meanings – at the level of their ‘associative’ meanings (that is, at the connotative level) – for here ‘meaning’ are not apparently fixed in natural perception (that is, they are not fully naturalized), and their fluidity of meaning and association can be more fully exploited and transformed. So it is at the connotative level of sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification. (p.6)

According to Eco (1979), a ‘sign’ represents “something else to somebody only because this ‘standing-for’ relation is mediated by an *interpretant*” (p.15). Furthermore, Chandler (2017) describes that signs may signify one thing, but they have multiple meanings.

In addition, in film study, sign is complicatedly illustrated. Monaco (2009) describes the sign of cinema as ‘a short-circuit sign’ because “the signifier and the signified are almost identical” (p.176). Wollen (1969) explains that cinematic signs are of three orders: the icon, the index, and the symbol.

In deeply studying signs underlying in the animation *Spirited Away*, the application of semiotics theory is used.

## Data Collection

The data were collected from the visuals and dialogues in English subtitled version of the animation *Spirited Away*, known as *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* in Japan, which is one of Studio Ghibli animations written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki in 2001.

This fantasy animation is about Chihiro, a ten year-old girl, who is on the way to a new home in the countryside with her parents. The family get lost and reach a deserted amusement park that is actually a magical world. While exploring the place, her parents eat some food from the stall so they are turned into pigs. Chihiro meets a mysterious boy, Haku, who advises her to get a job at Yubaba's spirit bathhouse to save her parents and return to her world. To work in the bathhouse, Chihiro's identity is being erased and she has to adapt herself to be a part of the spirit world. During the hard time, she develops friendships with many characters who assist her to complete her journey.

Every scene and every detail in animated films are created with individual drawings, paintings, or illustrations, animation is the art of filmmaker's imagination in symbolic images. (Cooper, 2010; Dirk, 2017; Well, 2007). In addition, *Spirited Away* is made traditionally with frame-by-frame drawing with few touches of compute-generated imagery. Miyazaki, who is the director and plot writer, personally draws thousands of frames by hand (Brooks, 2005; Collin, 2014; Mes, 2002). It implies that Miyazaki is the only

one who encodes all the meanings and signs in the film. Therefore, the director's interview about the film is included into data analysis.

Two independent coders watched the film and agreed on the coding of visuals and dialogues reflected capitalism including consumerism and greed. In this study, signs refer to languages or images that represent meanings or ideologies. They can be icons, indexes, or symbols. Capitalism in the film refers to a social relationship between the capitalists and the workers that impacts people relationships, and their consumptions. While consumerism refers to the enjoyment of desiring and buying or over consumptions. Besides, greed refers to the selfish desire for wealth and objects or extreme self-interest perceived as immoral or unacceptable. In the data analysis process, the director's interview is concerned as well.

## Data Analysis

The analysis of semiotic signs representing capitalism in *Spirited Away* including the visual images, and the dialogues is revealed as follows:

1. Capital is the western concept of a social relationship between the capitalists who own means of production and the workers who are labor forces. Capitalism aims to make profits so it encourages people to consume more and more. The labors work to gain money to buy products. Wealthy people are defined by their money and their belongings. Yubaba and her workers represent the capital in the bathhouse. Yubaba is the owner of the bathhouse living on the top floor. Her room is well decorated in western

style. She dresses in western style and owns a lot of jewelry. On the contrary, the workers live on the lowest floors of the bathhouse. They pack together in the rooms with no decorations and sign up for work like factory workers.

2. The capitalist is the only one who own the profits. In the film, when the river god left the bathhouse, he left a lot of gold dust on the floor. The workers tried to gather the gold, but the manager of the bathhouse told them that the gold is the company property. Moreover, Yubaba stated that they had to return the gold to her.

Kamaji, a worker in the boiler room, also stated the idea of working in the bathhouse that he is a “ slave to the boiler’s that heat the baths.” Furthermore, he told the soot balls that they had to work or else the spell would wear off and they would be returned to soot. These dialogues reflect the main theme of capitalism that working-class people sell their labor-power or their ability to work to the capitalists to gain a wage.

3. The value of people in the capital is determined by the money they can make. Chihiro was not welcomed at first because she could not work or made money. However, after she served the stinky god and Yubaba got a lot of gold. Then, Yubaba praised her.

4. Both the human world and the spirit world present the idea of consumerism. First, Chihiro’s father shows that he believes in the power of money. He has credit cards and cash so he can buy the things he wants,

such as the four-wheel- drive car and the food on the stalls. When Chihiro's parents eat the food from the stalls, they picked up more food than they are able to consume. This represents the over consumption of food in the present day.

Miyazaki mentions about consumerism and greed in The Hayao Miyazaki Web that "Today, the world has become ambiguous; but even though it is ambiguous, the world is encroaching and trying to consume (everything). It is the main theme of this film to describe such a world clearly in the form of a fantasy." (Reider, 2005).

5. No Face is a dark spirit without identity who looks like a black man wearing a white mask. This character can devour other spirits and everything without any limits. The more it eats, the bigger it becomes. This black monster is another representation of consumerism as he exchanges gold with food and services in the bathhouse. He also attempts to gain Chihiro's attention by offering her a lot of gold.

Similar to people who live in the world of capitalism with greed, No Face use gold to buy anything he wants; however, his consumption could not fulfill his needs. He is still lonely

After he meets Chihiro, he could stop his greed and then vomits everything out. Later, he goes to a witch's house and finally finds out that the sufficient life in a small house could serve his real needs.

6. Chihiro is first mentioned as a lazy, spoiled crybaby and Boh shows that he is selfish. They represents children in the modern world. In addition, according to how Yubaba treats her baby, she portrays the image of parents in the capitalism world as well. Miyazaki mentions about the main character, Chihiro, that

But there are two scenes in *Spirited Away* that could be considered symbolic for the film. One is the first scene in the back of the car, where she is really a vulnerable little girl, and the other is the final scene, where she's full of life and has faced the whole world. Those are two portraits of Chihiro which show the development of her character.” (Mes, 2002, p.39)

## Conclusion

The semiotics analysis of the animated film *Spirited Away* revealed that the setting – the bathhouse, the main characters, the dialogues between the characters were the representations of capitalism. It also pointed out that Yubaba reflected the capitalist. The bathhouse itself symbolized the capital assets while the bathhouse workers served as labor. The bathhouse owner and the workers are the representations of capital relationship. The director also dresses up the bathhouse owner in western style which is contrast with all the setting; for capitalism is a western ideology. Moreover, many behaviors of characters liked Chihiro's parents and the bathhouse workers who overvalue money and gold or Yubaba's collections of jewelry represented consumerism. The monster, No Face,

who never fulfill himself symbolizes greed. The young characters like Chihiro and Boh showed the impact of capitalism on younger generations.

The more people want, the more they consume. Firat et al. (2013) and D'Souza (2015) stated that in modern capitalism people consume goods or services more than their basic use-value. In addition, capitalism encourage people in the society to be more independent and alienated. Since the new generations are growing up in the world of capitalism. Their parents have to work hard to gain money so they tend to buy stuffs to please their children instead of spending time with them (Davies & Ikeno, 2002).

Children today are more impatience because they are spoiled by their parents and grandparents; there is a Japanese term used to applied to the 25-year-old youths and younger children. It that literally means “new human beings”. That refers to them as “selfish, self-centered, and disrespectful of elders and tradition” (Jandt, 2006, p. 89). While the audiences enjoyed the film, they may learn something about capitalism including consumerism, and greed. Miyazaki tried to communicate his point of view with his audiences. In this film, he taught children and parents to be aware of capitalism and reminded people about how capitalism affected the younger generation as he mentions in his interview that “I believe that stories have an important role to play in the formation of human beings, that they can stimulate, amaze and inspire their listeners (Mes, 2002).

## Limitations

As *Spirited Away* is a Japanese animation, the researcher cannot study the film in its original version. Even though, the English subtitle is carefully translated by DisneyPixar, there must be something lost in translation. Therefore, future studies should be done with the assistance of Japanese language and culture experts.

Moreover, because of the limited time period, the coders may lose some points that the further studies could identify more.

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