

"Animating 'Ma'" data-bbox="310 192 680 234"/>

Miyazaki and His Train Scene from Spirited Away"
(Case Study)



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Abstract

*"We have a word for that in Japanese," he said.
"It's called Ma. Emptiness. It's there intentionally."
(Miyazaki in an Interview with film critic Roger Ebert from 2002) (001)*

The Train Scene in Spirited Away, is an almost 2 minutes of moving Painting, it is part of a film, but even without the whole film this can be a stand alone 2 mins short film or in the other hand you can just remove it and the film will still loose no vital plot information.

So here I will discuss how it can be a stand alone film, on the other hand how this scene that has nothing to do with the plot is also the most significant part in the entire film. And most importantly, how does Miyazaki do it.



(figure S01)

Introduction

As a Film Animator and Story Teller myself I will put my focus around how Miyazaki connects his audience to his films, while his stories are inherently unbelievable, we still believe they exists, Spirited Away and it's Train scene is his magic at its finest, we will try to break it down I'm gonna look at, How is this scene that impactful, as a part of the film and or as a stand alone scene, How both of these aspect add into each other to fullest, the tiny details and narrative build up in the film and in Miyazaki's work and how he uses "MA" to maximize this phenomena.

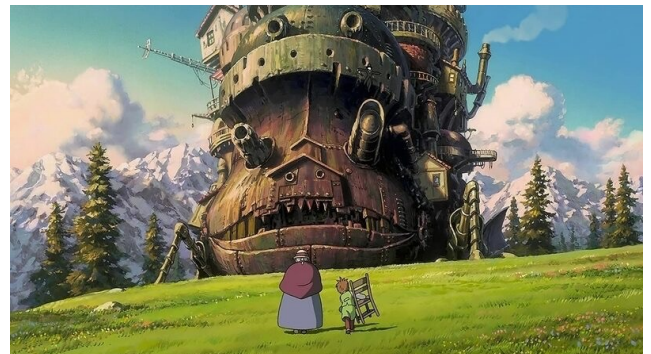
To Understand this I have looked at numerous interviews, Reviews, many books and watch Spirited Away Multiple times, can't remember the times I have watched and paused the train scene again and again, watched other Miyazaki's films to further connect the dots, films like Howl's Moving

Castle, Princess Mononoke to all the way back to the first Studio Ghibli Film, Castle in the Sky and having multiple discussions with other Ghibli Admirers.

I am going to take you all with me to this journey, lets get on this train and find out what Miyazaki has created.

1. How Does Miyazaki do it?

When it comes to the medium of animation, there are very few directors who have taken their own unique approach to film making, Miyazaki is one of them, mixing different elements and creating his own form of art, the employment of immersive realism in his visual storytelling, The balance between elements of fantasy and realism. His films are like paintings, they have subtle informations, a peacefulness and different audience perceiving different perspectives.



(figure H01)

Immersive realism or in other words Grounded Reality, one of the finest examples is The Castle in Howl's Moving Castle, This particular screen grab explains this concept perfectly, there's a fantasy based castle set up in a very realistic landscape, further more the contrast between the exterior and the interior of the castle keeps the audience grounded and connected, whenever we are on the outside there's a far from reality giant chaotic moving castle which is barely holding on to it self



(figure H02)

However, when we come inside the castle its just like a normal house, a warm and peaceful place most of us desire to have, or can connect to.



(figure H03)

This is how Miyazaki connects us to his worlds. Miyazaki in his book "Starting Point" stated,

"Anime may depict fictional worlds, but I nonetheless believe that at its core it must have a certain realism. Stated in another way, the animator must fabricate a lie that seems so real, viewers will think the world depicted, might actually exist."

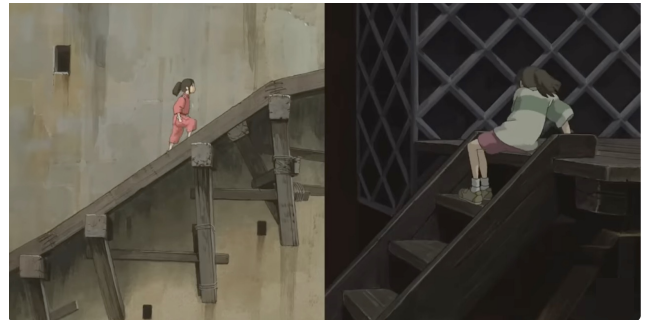
Lets dive into an example from, Spirited Away, the bath house feels alive and real. While it's inherently unbelievable, we believe it exists, because it's so well established: there are employees with jobs to do, sleeping quarters, a coal-powered furnace that heats the baths, different kinds of soap for different clients, even a process by which to call certain kinds of soap for different kinds of baths. If you followed another employee, what would their day be like? With all of these details, it feels like there are untold stories unfolding in the background, and one might be your story.



(figure S02)

This is the importance of proper world building, it doesn't feel like a cheap facade put up for the convenience of the story we're being told. Instead, there is depth and richness to the world, it feels like it extends beyond the edges of the frame.

But the important thing Miyazaki did in Spirited Away was he showed us this fabricated reality through Chihiro's eyes, that's his trick, that's how we are lingered in deep with her emotions. let me give you a tiny example.



(figure S03)

Same stairs, same character, the size has changed? or is it that Chihiro been through so much that now she is just more strong? or just unbothered? This is where we really start to connect with her, we start to believe she is a real person. There are a lot of instances and minute details where we can see Chihiro reacting and acting like a real person would.



Wearing her shoes and taping her toes to adjust them. (figure S04 & S05)

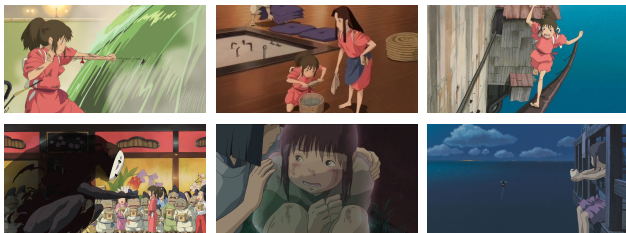


Standing for a moment to grasp to reality of what has happened to her. (figure S06 & S07)



Eating her food and after holding it up for the entire film finally breaking up and crying, after finally accepting the fact that this is all real and she is stuck in the spirit world and she might never (figure S08 & S09)

get her parents back and she might have to stay here forever and her parents might get eaten, this moment when she is struck by reality and she is crying, let's back up, remember how Miyazaki is using Chihiro's eyes to guide us through his created world, the moment Chihiro's has accepted the reality we are deep in and connected and now we are starting to believe this world is real, Chihiro is real, and When we as a audience have accepted that she is real, her problem and difficulties and struggles becomes real to us, this all builds up, this all chaos, trauma and drama is guiding us as a audience with Chihiro all to the Train Station.



(figure S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, & S15)

from the moment Chihiro entered the Spirit world to now. two things are constant, one, the whole movie is set up around the bathhouse, entire film is revolving around Chihiro a strugglung little girl trying to make a place in this bathhouse, trying to survive, panicking, maturing, getting strong and independent and specially not getting a single break. it is either she is in a chaotic situations, hard labour work, sitting worrying about her parents or just crying and breaking out.

But then comes this scene. (figure S16 & S17)



Chihiro walking into nothingness, an empty train platform, with a train that goes only one way and as she walks we sense a calmness around her, adding this scene right after the most jam packed action scene of the film make its feel more soothing, like creating a contrast with emotions.

This scene is setting up a new dimensions, like for the first time we see Chihiro just walking into a unknown without any fear, she is either really calm or just unbothered.

We know Miyazaki is known for his elaborate world building but Chihiro just left that all behind, and why is that?

Now when she is detached from the main location, to a empty space, all our focus is now on her our protagonist Chihiro, and this is genius, now we are fully connected with her, since there is nothing else to focus on, and it is relieving to finally see her catch a break wander into a nice calm water, and then this scene come.

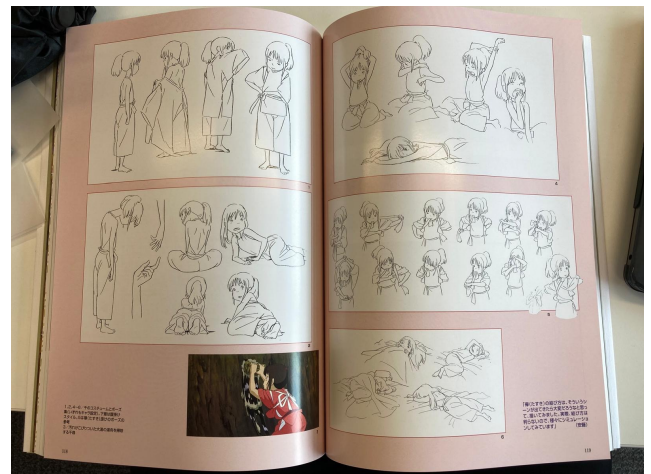


(figure S18)

Seeing bathhouse from far away, as Chihiro stands on the Train Platform, see leaves everything behind not knowing the outcomes of her travel, yet she is calm and composed and so is the entire pace of the film.

previously Miyazaki was using the environment to connect us with Chihiro's character but now he detached her from it, this brings her into primary focus, that is how he does it.

we are also settling down as a audience, and are ready to take this ride on the train, and are fully emotionally focused on Chihiro.



Also took some time out to study Miyazaki's technical side of developing his characters, borrowed this book from a friend who got it from Japan "The Art of Miyazaki's Spirited Away".

We can see how much effort he has put in to develop the characters personality, turnarounds and movements.

Wanted to touch this part of "Miyazaki's Fabricating a lie so true" as well.

2. Train scene as a stand alone film

Lets take a little break from Chihiro and the film's narrative and focus solely on the scene as its own, and let dissect it but first lets see what Miyazaki has to say about this scene and why I chose this heading.

"If you remember in your past when you rode something for the first time, or felt really nervous about something, you probably can't recall what was in your surroundings. I racked my mind on how to portray a scene where you couldn't remember your surroundings. In short, in that world, people are shadows." Miyazaki from the book (Mushime To Anime)

Why does this scene feels incredibly real, despite its fantastical setting?

Have you ever been to a public Train or bus in a new city for the first time in a unknown surrounding?



(figure S19 & S20)

if yes you can feel as we follow Chihiro on her journey, how we can relate to her sense of disconnection from the people around her. It's like when we're on a subway in a new city and everyone seems like a stranger.

Miyazaki's brilliance lies in his ability to make this fantastical world feel so believable. Chihiro's experience reflects our own moments of feeling lost or disconnected in unfamiliar surroundings, for me it was while my first time navigating the London Underground.

On the train, the other passengers seem like anonymous figures, and Chihiro's perspective allows us to see them through her eyes. It's a reminder of how we often perceive others when we're in a similar situation – their faces blend into a blur, and their actions seem ordinary yet somehow intriguing.



WARING ABBOTT/GETTY IMAGES (Figure G01)

You see this Picture, and you see a bunch of people, and none whom you recognise, different characters, different people, who altogether look quite similar but individually they have their own stories, and when you're here, you are one of them.

In this scene, Miyazaki captures something universal about the human experience. Chihiro's journey becomes a metaphor for our own struggles to navigate the complexities of life. Even in a world filled with magic and wonder, we can still find moments of profound connection and understanding. It's a testament to Miyazaki's storytelling prowess that a scene set in a fantasy realm can feel so deeply relatable to our own lives.

A very real reality, that's what Miyazaki did here, he created a lie out of a very real scenario, that we can all connect to without having to have understanding of the entire plot and narrative of the film, if you play this scene only to anyone, they will still sit down and watch it and form a connection, and when you connect it with the understanding of that this scene belongs to a film, you will instantly connect with the protagonist, because you've been in their shoes.

The attribute of this scene, that it can be a stand alone short film is what makes it very powerful, put it up with the entire film narrative, Boom a masterpiece.

But the point is, detailing and not finding a shortcut, What Miyazaki did here was he took his time developing each and every frame, and that's why we connect with the film right to it's core. Furthermore we yet have to explore it as being part of the entire narrative.

Isn't it remarkable that Miyazaki does not animate to a script, but illustrates without plan to the end, discovering the course of a film as he goes? Is that why his characters feel so free, as if they were independent of him, having a life of their own? What of his films' splendid detail? Is it the source of their weight and reality?

Napier, Susan. "MIYAZAKI." *First Things*:

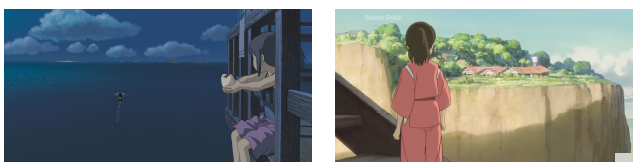


(figure S21)

Miyazaki's decision to eschew traditional narrative conventions in favour of more atmospheric moments speaks to his belief in the power of cinema as a transformative and immersive medium. Rather than simply conveying information or advancing the story, Miyazaki uses these moments to evoke a sense of wonder, curiosity, and introspection in the audience.

3. Why is this scene that Impactful?

There are many instances in the movie where everything pauses, or there are scenes that have nothing to do with the plot or to progress the story, they are just scenes of nothingness, with characters interacting, emotionally expressing, just looking at a distance, sighing or just eating in silence. (figure S22 & S23)



A lot filmmaker's use this technique in their films to give a breathing space, i.e these scenes from the movies, 1917, Nomadland and Blade Runner 2049.



(figure 101)



(figure N01)



(figure B01)

Usually the directors use these moments to provide a sense of time and space within the narrative, Usually to allow characters to pause and reflect on the events unfolding on screen or to create a contrast between calmness and chaos or to have a more dynamic story telling.

However Miyazaki used this technique with a totally different intentions, as for him when he chooses to add Ma in his films, it is not for the character in the films or for the plot or his films developing narrative, it is for us, the audience,

He could've have skipped the train scene added a montage instead, few shots and it would have not disrupted the plot even a little, BUT where chihiro might have taken the train we as a audience would have missed it.

Miyazaki decided to take us with her, now its Chihiro, her 3 companions, other people in the train and us.



(figure S24)

While also breaking the fourth wall and pointing directly towards the audience.

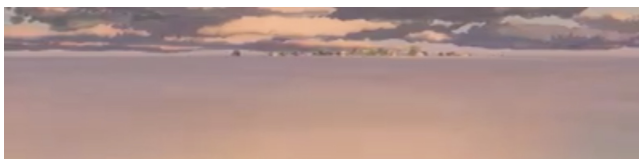
Now since it is established why he took this approach towards developing this scene and how he got us to come on this ride, lets start looking at the details he added in the scene that made us fall further deep into the narrative and what has "Ma" to do with all this?



(figure S25)

If I were to draw an eye and nose and put color into the passengers around Sen, visually we may get "emotionally involved" with those passengers when the scene doesn't really need it. I don't really like doing that, needlessly. For the child, in reality, they may have just looked like shadows to him/her.

Miyazaki from the book (Mushime To Anime)



(figure S26, S27 & S28)

Now since we have all our focus on Chihiro, The sequence continues, we see more unknown, an abandon house on a island, a quite village in a middle of nowhere, and Man and a child, things like metaphor or hints that make the audience question everything

And then Miyazaki goes a step further, the train stops at a unknown station in a middle of nowhere.



(figure S29, S30 & S31)

and all the passengers get off. and as the train leave the station we see this girl standing alone on the platform, Perhaps another metaphor? However now it's just Chihiro for us to have our attention to, even though she is a animated character, but becuase Miyazaki kept giving us moment of Ma to connect and resonate with her, we are deeply indolge in her journey, this is How Miyazaki uses Ma, and here he is going to

Chihiro's decision to take the train indicates her final step toward independence. Miyazaki explains, "I wanted to write a story where the girl catches the train with her own will in a world that she experiences for the first time. We know that she is very afraid and unsure of what to do"
Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art

maximize it and the 3 next scenes are gonna put us in a another dimension. scene 1, as the train move forward further into the unknown, we see the last station disappearing into the background, now we have no idea where we are, but we know we are far from home.



(figure S32)

here it gets more intense when we get inside we see Chihiro alone, I know she still have her 3 travel companion with her, but they make her more vulnerable because at this point she is taking their responsibility as well.



(figure S33)

Right now while passing by we see unusual neon signs out the window, might be a metaphor or just something Miyazaki did because he could, but now the emptiness in the train cabin, and the music and the slow pace is all leading to next scene



(figure S34)

Train is moving forward and we can see the station disappearing behind in the mist, Chihiro is moving further into the unknown and yet she is only looking forward. but these 3-5 seconds of frame focusing right on her with a slight zoom in has a lot details over here.

Where in a usual film narrative, a director might have added a montage of Chihiro's memory flashbacks, but no, In this scene we are not any more looking things through Chihiro's perspective, we are now a observer we have our own perspective now, we are seeing things as we have understood



(figure S35)

Looking deep into her eyes, we see everything we don't need a flashback montage, all the details that Miyazaki had worked on developing everything has lead us to develop our own eye, we are no longer an audience, but a witness, as we have seen everything, we were with her all the time, specially on the train, nothing was skipped, it's Miyazaki's way, he uses the concept of, Don't tell the story, rather show it.

Conclusion

And that's how he does it, firstly he fabricates a lie which is very believable, then he gives us time and pauses for us to consume it, and then proceeds to show us everything, you can't deny things you have witnessed and that's how we connect, relate and experience his stories, however the main ingredient is Ma, without it we would not be able to consume any of it, so these scene that have nothing to do with the film, end up being the core of the entire narrative, because this is where our emotional connection to the narrative developed and lies.

building an Imaginative feeling, creating a grounded reality, and building narrating around life like scenarios is what Miyazaki excels at, and that's how we get indulged into his artwork because no matter how fantastical these stories be, subconsciously they still fee familiar and that's why we connect to it emotionally.

In conclusion, Miyazaki's train scene in "Spirited Away" is more than just a part of the movie – it's a powerful story all on its own. Miyazaki carefully made every detail count, creating a moment that's both amazing by itself and important to the bigger story.

By focusing on "Ma," Miyazaki lets us feel like we're right there with Chihiro. We get to understand her feelings deeply as she goes through her journey.

The train scene is like a small version of Miyazaki's whole idea about storytelling. It mixes fantasy and real life perfectly. It helps us think about our own lives and struggles.

Overall, Miyazaki's train scene teaches us that even in a world of magic and wonder, it's the quiet moments that really touch our hearts. It's like he's showing us that life is a beautiful painting, and every moment is a stroke of the brush.

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(Figure N01) Nomadland (2020)

(Figure 101) 1917 (2019)

(Figure G01) WARING ABBOTT/GETTY IMAGES
