NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Miyazaki's Hybrid Worlds and Their Riddle-Stories: Western Tropes and *Kishōtenketsu*

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"Fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict," famously states Jack Zipes. And yet, this statement does not always seem to apply to non-Western story structures. An example of this is the East Asian *Kishōtenketsu*, which implies a story development that does not necessarily revolve around conflicts, but that interprets potential clashes more as contrasts that can be somehow harmonized. In many of Hayao Miyazaki's movies (e.g., *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Spirited Away*, *The Secret World of Arietty*), it is possible to detect, on the one hand, the widespread presence of Western fairy-tale tropes, and, on the other hand, a plot strongly influenced by the *Kishōtenketsu* model. This article argues that: 1.) The way in which Miyazaki's stories represent conflictual situations is less dichotomous than in the Western tradition, and conflicts in his movies are depicted in the forms of open riddles, implying an interrogative attitude, a playful and flexible state of mind; and 2.) The employment of unusual narrative patterns in Miyazaki's movies, mixing up together Eastern and Western frames of reference, gives rise to stories that puzzle the mind of spectators, working as complex narrative riddles.

Keywords:
Kishotenketsu, riddle, Miyazaki, fairy tales, hero's journey, complex narratives

INTRODUCTION

Studio Ghibli is a Japanese animation studio founded in 1985 by Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, Yasuyoshi Tokuma, and Toshio Suzuki. Since its creation, it has produced many critically acclaimed and commercially successful animated films, and made the history of animation in Japan, emerging as the most relevant and worldwide known Japanese animation studio (see Odell and Le Blanc). Miyazaki himself is considered one of the greatest animators of all time (Bendazzi). He has directed, written, and produced many of the studio's films, and his works are known for their strong female characters, their highly imaginative elements, their nostalgic atmosphere, and a widespread celebration of the natural world.

Miyazaki's movies have been extremely popular in the Western and Asian world alike in the last couple of decades, providing viewers with colorful, poetical, and sometimes melancholic storyworlds, in which very often young protagonists (more frequently girls) wander in fantastic dimensions in-between the magical and the real. Recurrently, these fantastic dimensions are introduced through travel: at the beginning of Miyazaki's movies, before the magic appears, characters are traveling towards a more-or-less defined destination, leaving the known behind, in a *mise-en-abyme* of the upcoming story. This move could be said to bring closer the spectator and the characters. Just as the spectator is new to the storyworld, so the character is new to the particular portion of the storyworld they are traveling to; Yet, both locations represent a mélange of familiar and unfamiliar features: Miyazaki's storyworld approached by the spectator always retains some realistic elements, and the place the character is travelling to rarely entails a complete disruption from their reality (as they are not traveling, for example, to Mars). This recognition of the familiar in the unfamiliar could work here also as a *mise-en-abyme* of the content of our discussion.

This article looks at Miyazaki's stories investigating what makes the movies' structure so puzzling and baffling, and at the same time so compelling. We consider, in particular, three case studies: *Spirited Away*, *The Secret World of Arrietty, and My Neighbour Totoro,* which we believe (also supported by Bendazzi) well represent the storytelling strategies and customs of the Japanese filmmaker.

In fact, we argue that the key to the riddle of Miyazaki's stories lies in the peculiar merging of Western and Eastern narrative constructions, especially of Western fairy-tale tropes and the pattern of the Hero's Journey, with the recurrent presence of the East Asian story structure of the *Kishōtenketsu*, a four-part narrative composition first born in Chinese poetry and now widespread in many different

types of narration. We focus more specifically on the topic of conflicts, a typical trope of Western fairy tales that is less pervasive and more nuanced in the *Kishōtenketsu*, which is indeed often recognized to imply a story development not necessarily revolving around conflicts. We show how Miyazaki's stories deal with conflicts, and how they are instead often related to some sort of riddle to solve. In the second part of the article, we emphasize how the hybridization of Western and East Asian cognitive styles and story structures, realized in Miyazaki's analyzed movies, give rise to narrations that puzzle the mind of Western spectators, working as complex narrative riddles.[1]

STORY STRUCTURES IN MIYAZAKI'S MOVIES

Fairy-tale Tropes and the Hero's Journey

"Fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict," fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* x) famously states, and it is indeed true that many Western fairy tales involve some sort of opposition and clash: between the cruel witch and the valorous prince, between the little girl and the big bad wolf, between the mistreated princess and the wicked stepmother. Despite the variety of themes contained in Western fairy tales, addressing and solving a problematic situation has been repeatedly acknowledged as a recurrent trope. Even in Vladimir Propp's foundational analysis of the functions of fairy tales, many of the thirty-one individuated functions involve a struggle, a problem to deal with, or a confrontation.[2] The quest almost all traditional fairy tales present (see Zipes, Teverson, Jones) is connected to different kinds of obstacles to be overcome through various means (magical tools, helpers, fights, etc.). As Zipes emphasizes, through the depiction of conflicts, fairy tales address the fact that "we are all misfit for the world, and somehow we must fit in, fit in with our environment and other people, and thus we must invent or find the means through communication to satisfy and resolve conflicting desires and instincts" (Zipes x).

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1 To our knowledge, not many Western publications analyzing the use of the *Kishōtenketsu* are available, to date. One notable exception is the preliminary study on narrative structures in interactive digital narratives conducted by Koenitz et al., focused on "looking beyond Aristotle and Campbell to non-Western narrative traditions to expand the corpus of narrative structures available to [Interactive Digital Narratives] designers and game developers" (2).

2 Even if many aspects of Propp's definition of the fairy tale have been nowadays questioned, some of the topics he first identified as characterizing its plot's development are still generally accepted as important elements present in the fairy-tale genre (such as the presence of a quest, and the various tests and conflicts the quest may bring forward).

Different types of conflicts have been identified as characterizing not only fairy tales, but also the majority of Western narratives: "conflict is the heartbeat of all writing," says Egri in his *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. Without conflict there would be no story, read many Western guides for fiction writers, as most narratives revolve around a conflictual situation. This is what generates the difficulty, the problem to be solved, which then becomes the driving force behind the actions of the characters. Traditionally, it is said that there exist seven types of conflict that create seven story patterns: Man vs Man, Man vs Self, Man vs Nature, Man vs Society, Man vs God, Man Caught in the Middle, Man and Female, Man vs Machine.[3]

Conflict, as mentioned, constitutes an essential plot element of many Western narratives, including fairy tales. The quest most fairy tales present is often connected to another prototypical structure of Western stories, the so-called "Hero's Journey." The Hero's Journey is a structure comprising three acts (departure, initiation, and return) which comprises a series of prototypical steps, generally twelve or seventeen. The Hero's Journey has been recognized originally by Joseph Campbell. In his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell argues for the existence of a "Monomyth", or a story that can somehow summarize or encompass all mythological narratives in the West. Campbell famously summarized the minimal structure of the Monomyth as follows:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men. (Campbell 23)

The Hero with a Thousand Faces has been one of the most influential narratological theorizations within the audiovisual entertainment industry, quickly becoming a fundamental basis for most of Hollywood's productions due to the (Western-)universal appeal it exerts and the immediateness of its reception by the public. Indeed, a further fundamental text on the Hero's Journey came (maybe unsurprisingly) from a Hollywood scriptwriter, Christopher Vogler, who, with his

3 This catalog has been attributed to British writer Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, but its exact origin is not certain. The last one (Man versus Machine) is not attributed to Quiller-Couch but reported by other more recent non-academic sources such as the wiki of tvtropes.org. It stems mostly from the substitution of a man for a machine.

The Writer's Journey marked a second, decisive recognition of validity of this narrative structure as a basis for blockbuster movie productions. Vogler's perspective is much less theoretical and more practical than the academic and historically accurate account of Campbell, and it operationalizes the Monomyth as the Hero's Journey, translating what he defines as a common but fluctuating knowledge of Hollywood into a crystallized shape, *de facto* creating a guide for scriptwriters while allowing a sneak peek behind the working mechanisms of the audiovisual entertainment industry.[4]

The model of the Hero's Journey has therefore deeply influenced Hollywood screenwriters, becoming a standard narrative structure, and it also features as the main narrative model for the biggest American animation company, Disney (incidentally, Vogler worked also as a Disney script assessor). Given these premises, the case of Studio Ghibli, which is "now, outside Hollywood, the most profitable animation company in the world" (Odell and Le Blanc 14), is particularly interesting. In fact, while Miyazaki's production does not seem to shun the influences of the Hero's Journey trope, it employs some of its customs in a rather unique and unusual manner, frequently in quite a different fashion from how it is used in Hollywood productions (and Disney productions in particular). In Miyazaki's movies, a young protagonist is frequently portrayed, most of the times a young girl going through various vicissitudes, encountering different characters and creatures, and being subjected to some kind of test or challenge ("the choice of a clever, strong, and brave female protagonist," (Novielli 127) is a common trait to almost all of Miyazaki's movies). This pattern follow at least partly some of the Hero's Journey motifs, together with the fairy-tale trope of the quest: the heroine is appointed to achieve a goal, which generally consists of finding something or a problem to solve.

Thus, in *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*), from 2001, the young Chihiro finds herself in another dimension, in between a spirit world and a fantasy one, where her parents have been turned into pigs. Chihiro has to survive in this novel world, trying to avoid being turned into an animal herself and working

4 A caveat that is necessary when talking about the Hero's Journey is that it has to be considered a structuralist abstraction, and sometimes an extreme one. Indeed, since it cannot have defined boundaries, the Hero's Journey is almost always applicable to almost all stories, as its applicability is directly connected to the level of abstraction applied: as soon as there exists a character, a story can almost always be described through the Hero's Journey, if abstracted enough. As such, this structure should be treated with caution, and it should not be over-applied. Similar considerations could be drawn for the Kishōtenketsu. Here, the Hero's Journey is seen as one of the tropes of Western movies, and it is applied only to exemplify one among the numerous and complex juxtaposition of Western and Asian customs in Miyazaki's production.

at a bathhouse for spirits while searching for a way to save her parents and to return to normal reality. During her quest, she finds helpers such as Kamaji, an initially grumpy *yokai* (a supernatural being, similar to a spirit) with many arms, and Lin, a servant in the bathhouse who, after some initial discontent, takes Chihiro under her protection. The main character to advise and assist Chihiro as a mentor is Haku, a young boy who is also a dragon and, we find out in the end, a river spirit who once saved Chihiro from drowning. There is a witch, Yubaba, running the bathhouse, who appears to be Chihiro's main antagonist. Chihiro goes through a journey of self-development, starting off as extremely frightened and insecure and needing a lot of external support. She then learns to deal with spirits, challenges, and hard tasks and begins to help others herself. In the end, she frees her parents and goes back to the ordinary world. It is apparent here how many elements from traditional fairy tales (e.g., the witch, the mysterious alternative world, the magical helpers) and from the Hero's Journey story structure (e.g., the journey into the region of supernatural wonder, the difficult tasks, the self-development, the return to the actual reality after being transformed and having achieved the power to save others) are used by Miyazaki to shape and substantiate the narration of Chihiro's adventures.

Similarly, in 2010's *The Secret World of Arrietty* (*Karigurashi no Arietty*), Arrietty, a miniature girl from a family of "Borrowers" (a term to describe miniature human-like creatures who live in the shadows of humans' homes), ventures out of her domestic environment to explore the house (and world) of the humans she lives close to, even befriending a young human boy (Shō). Her task seems to be to keep the status quo so that her family can go on living peacefully without being noticed and threatened by the humans. Her antagonist at first appears to be Haru, the old human housemaid who tries to capture the Borrowers as soon as she discovers their existence. In the end, Arrietty and her family, thanks to the help of another Borrower coming from outside, abandon the house where they lived to search for a new place. Again, Arrietty undergoes a journey, both actual and symbolic, in which she grows and learns, encounters a new world, and is supported by external helpers and tools. The initial situation presents Arrietty and her parents living in the walls and floors of a human summer house, borrowing little things to survive from the house's owners. The confrontation with adversary forces happens when the little creatures are discovered by the humans, in particular by Haru, and their safety is thus compromised. The final resolution is represented by the Borrowers leaving to find a new secure home. It is also worth noting that *Arrietty* is an adaptation of a classic from British children's literature, Mary Norton's *The*

Borrowers (1952), which again stresses the fact that many tropes of Western narratives and fairy tales find their place in the story development of the movie.[5]

The last movie we are here analyzing, *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*), 1988, though having a structure with a less "action-oriented plot" and being instead more "an episodic examination" of the two girl protagonists' "daily childhood life" (Greenberg 96), still shows typical aspects of the Western tale, too. The two sisters (Mei and Satsuki) need to adapt to a new life in the countryside. They encounter an alternative fantasy dimension with the magical helpers Totoro and his friends, and they learn to deal with their mother's absence. As with the previous examples, there are also specific plot elements here which come from Western children's literature such as situations and characters inspired by Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*, Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*, and Lucy Maude Montgomery's *Anne of the Green Gables*, all novels which Miyazaki has adapted in his works (see Raz Greenberg). The house of the two girls, surrounded by an appearing and disappearing magical forest, again resonates with the atmosphere of a traditional fairy tale in which the trope of the mysterious forest representing foreign forces to confront with is a widespread motif. Transformations, discovery, and potential danger in fairy tales are frequently linked to the exploration of enigmatic woods. As Zipes underscores, "Woods are the natural setting for the fulfilment of desire (...) the self can explore its possibilities and undergo symbolic exchanges with nature inside and outside the self" (*The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* 361).

The plot of these three movies, with a young girl (or two, as in the case of *My Neighbor Totoro*) facing specific trials and tests, learning novel aspects of the world and of herself, and finally ending up in a more or less harmonious situation, is typical of many others of Miyazaki's movies such as *Princess Mononoke*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Ponyo*,[6] and *Howl's Moving Castle*. Both fairy tale elements (especially the theme of the quest) and the Hero's Journey with its triadic structure seem to be employed in these movies. And yet, the conflictual aspect characterizing these Western narrative models is more problematic and nuanced, when individuated in Miyazaki's work. In this sense,

5 For a study of the adaptation process and techniques involved in the making of *The Secret World of Arrietty*, see Catherine Butler's "Arrietty Comes Home: Studio Ghibli's The Borrower Arrietty and Its English-Language Dubs".

6 *Ponyo* is also particularly interesting in how it merges Japanese influences and inspirations from the Western fairy tale "The Little Mermaid": as Zipes remarks, it constitutes "a very loose, if not radical adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' and uses Japanese folklore and a contemporary ecological perspective to revisit Andersen's tale" (*The Enchanted Screen* 382).

Chihiro has to deal with a wicked witch, and with a *Kaonashi* (a sort of dark ghost, its name literally meaning "no face"), swallowing everything he finds and threatening all the creatures working in and visiting the bathhouse. But the wicked witch has a twin sister, Zeniba, and both two sisters are both bad *and* good. They create obstacles for Chihiro in some sense, but they also end up helping her in others. The *Kaonashi* is menacing and terrible in some scenes, devouring creatures in a merciless way, but it is also just a lonely spirit who desperately seeks Chihiro's friendship. The whole world of the spirits is simultaneously a threat, a dangerous place, and a dimension in which Chihiro finds balance, friendship, and self-fulfillment. Arrietty's conflicts happen with the humans, and yet her main antagonists are also her friends. If the housemaid could be considered a threat, Shō seems to be a helper ("Ally", in Vogler's terminology), and the intensity of his emotional connection with Arrietty is one of the main topics of the movie. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, the conflictual dimension does not materialize in an individual character. It resides instead in the illness of the two sisters' mother, and in a specific situation, when Mei runs away and cannot be found. However, even in this case, the conflicts are nuanced. The mother's absence functions as an element that increases the sisters' bond and personal confidence and allows them to become stronger and to learn to cope with difficulties, while Mei's temporary disappearance brings forth Totoro's intervention and the exciting tour in the cat-bus. In addition, even the seemingly sharp categorizations of conflicts and characters presented here turn out to be much more complex and articulated, as we will show in the second part of the article.

In a sense, many of these only apparent and transient conflicts have more the softer nature of temporary riddles, and there are indeed several actual riddles inserted in the stories. One example in *Spirited Away* is when the character Kamaji tells Chihiro a riddle about a door that opens and closes but has no knob (referring to an eye). Even the main problem of the story itself, finding Chihiro's parents is finally solved through a riddle. Zeniba asks Chihiro to guess which ones in a group of humans turned into pigs are her parents. In *The Secret World of Arrietty*, Arrietty's father Pod tells her a riddle to teach her how to find the way home when she is lost. In *My Neighbor Totoro* there are no explicit riddles, but the central conflictual situation, the disappearance of Mei, can be interpreted through the lenses of a riddle to solve: where has Mei gone? Which path can she have taken? Why has she left?

Riddles do not necessarily imply antagonisms and clashes; they are more related to an interrogative attitude, a playful and flexible state of mind.

Riddles, in the end, help Arrietty navigate the foreign human world. They help Chihiro deal with the cognitive complexities of time and space, and they participate in her process of developing creative abilities and survival skills. The riddle about Mei's disappearance in *My Neighbor Totoro* is solved and the sisters are brought closer together and in a stronger connection both with their mother and with Totoro and his magical friends. It is apparent then that if Miyazaki's movies do make use of story structures coming from the Western tradition, especially from classic fairy tales and from the famous Hero's Journey narrative model, they do so in a very atypical manner, making conflicts less relevant and more riddle-like, and maintaining a more changeable, fluid atmosphere, with less sharp distinctions. In this respect, it can be said, as Maria Roberta Novielli has observed, that "Miyazaki's enchanted world is not based in Manichean dualism; his heroines demonstrate that evil is a human creation, since there are positive components in everyone that can be highlighted through respect, solidarity and tolerance" (127).

The way in which Miyazaki creates this non-Manichean dimension is by a fluid combination of various styles and languages, even apparently conflicting ones, in a *non-conflictual* way, suggesting a many-sided, protean world open to different inspirations and influences. In this regard, one of his strategic moves as a creative storyteller is the interpolation of the above-analyzed types of story composition taken from Western narratives with the East Asian narrative structure of the *Kishōtenketsu*. Therefore, as highlighted by Paul Wells, in this way Miyazaki's style participates in what is a typical feature of Japanese art, which is not one of succession but of superimposition of new inspirations on old ones, realizing a free playful combination of indigenous culture with adapted forms.

The *Kishōtenketsu*

Kishōtenketsu is a type of narrative structure that first appeared in classical Chinese poetry, but that subsequently spread its influences in different contexts in the whole Asian area (modern prose, essay writing, movie structure, rhetorical devices) (see Takemata). As anticipated, the blurring of overt conflicts is a trait characterizing this narrative model, a trait that "makes it not convenient for expressing the western conflict-based storyline" (Richings 6). Instead, "the essence of kishōtenketsu is the depiction of contrast" (Richings 6): different types of contrasts that are not necessarily resolved but that are shown to be able to coexist in harmonious ways. If the Western Hero's Journey narrative model is made of three macrosections, as previously introduced, a story based on the *Kishōtenketsu* encompasses four parts: *ki*, the starting situation; *shoo*, the initial development of

that situation; *ten*, the "twist" or digression; and *ketsu*, the bringing of everything together to reach a conclusion (see again Takemata).[7] As highlighted by John Hinds, what is particularly puzzling from a Western viewpoint[8] is the use of the *ten* and the *ketsu*. The *ten* implies something the typical Western narrative structure is not familiar with, which is a shift that can also represent a non-directly related digression, or a type of development which does not entail necessarily a conflict: it can be a complication or a diversion. "In *ketsu*", Hinds explains, "the major difficulty involves the Japanese definition of this term and the difference between that and the English definition of 'conclusion'" (80). In this sense, Kazuo Takemata points out that a Japanese *ketsu* "needs not be decisive [*danteiteki*]. All it needs to do is to indicate a doubt or ask a question" (quoted in Hinds, 80).

This is precisely in line with the riddle-like, questioning attitude widespread in Miyazaki's movies where we rarely find brusque and clear-cut situations and conclusions. Instead, we experience more a meandering around various states and locations, punctuated with interconnections among characters and places, and with an interrogative, curious viewpoint. Hence, it is true that Chihiro manages to save her parents and to go back to her normal reality, as the Hero's Journey structure would imply. But it is also correct to state that there are many open questions left: What has happened to Haku? Has his soul been finally released? What is the exact nature of Chihiro and Haku's connection?[9] Will things in the bathhouse go back to how they were before Chihiro's arrival? How will Chihiro's life go on? In this regard, Zipes similarly notes "the major transformation is Chihiro's character, but it is not the typical fairy-tale transformation: she does not become beautiful, marry a prince, or demonstrate outwardly that she has changed. She returns to reality and remains somewhat puzzled" (*The Enchanted Screen* 387).

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7 "In contrast, the four-act structure permits greater foregrounding character by removing the incident-led aspect of the plot. Using this comparatively slower plot progression, character development takes precedence over the story" (Bird 7): this has been individuated as another feature characterizing the *Kishōtenketsu*, one that can indeed be linked to Miyazaki's mentioned movies, where introspection definitely prevails over a linear, goal-oriented narration.

8 Hinds focuses on "contrastive studies of Japanese and English" (80), concentrating in particular on essay writing styles, but his considerations are still valuable while looking at the Kishōtenketsu in the context of narrative models.

9 For instance, some fans online speculated Haku to be Chihiro's dead brother, a theory which seems to find little evidence in the movie but which nonetheless exemplifies the open nature of the narrative.

In a similar fashion, we are left with many doubts and non-solved riddles at the end of *The Secret World of Arrietty*: Where will Arrietty and her family go? Will they find a new home? And will Shō's heart surgery be successful? We may assume so, because it seems that the story is narrated by his voice remembering a distant past, but it is not a given. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, the exact identity of the forest spirit Totoro and his friends and their relationship to the surrounding world is left somehow suspended and unexplained. It is suggested that the mother's health is restored, and that she will come back, but this comes up mainly from the scenes shown during the end credits, not in the movie's conclusion itself.

Approaching the meaning and function of the *ten* is even harder from the perspective of a Western audience. Miyazaki's movies are full of seemingly non-connected scenes.[10] It can sometimes appear that there are many digressions and unrelated complications. On the one hand, in *Spirited Away*, the arrival of the *Kaonashi* in the bathhouse is an unexpected difficulty, and the whole story related to its eating many of the guests does not appear to be directly related to the unfolding of the "main" plot. On the other hand, if the *ten* is interpreted more in the sense of a "twist", the unexpected discovery that Haku is a dragon, and its related plot ramifications (in particular Chihiro's train journey to find Zeniba's twin sister), can be read as the *ten* of the story. Chihiro's train journey itself is a digression or a twist in which she explores a parallel twin dimension, and in which she learns to embrace a novel perspective on things; the "bad" witch has a "good" identical counterpart, and they can be seen as two faces of the same coin working as a way of introducing the concept of a multi-faceted reality, and of disclosing to Chihiro the existence of contrasts that can coexistence in some sort of harmony. The main "lesson" of the movie can then be stated to be the fact that "the world is chock-full of ambiguity" (Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen* 387), and previously unseen correspondences can always be discovered. In this sense, it can be here reminded that "*Ten* takes shape in the least expected way but is the most brilliantly exploding flower of the fireworks, without which the audience will not go home satisfied. It is where the writer devotes himself to fabricating his trick to similar effect" (Takahashi 157).

In *The Secret World of Arrietty,* the most brilliantly exploding flower of fireworks can be considered to be the moment in which Arrietty finds out that Shō is not an enemy, as she thought he could be, but a potential (and then actual) friend,

10 This consideration, just like all the others in the article, comes from a Western perspective, and in this case from the standards of a mental framework which does not recognize a pervasive interconnectedness among things and situations.

more similar to her than she would have ever imagined. Here, too, the *ten* has the value of introducing a new way of looking at reality. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, the *ten* is the arrival of the telegram announcing that the health of Satsuki and Mei's mother has worsened, and the subsequent disappearance of Mei. As previously stated, it may seem here that this is also the main conflictual situation of the story, but it has more the features of an interrogative, riddle-like scenario: what has happened to the mother? (as it turns out, nothing really serious which also reinforces the non-conflictual nature of the event) Why has Mei run off? Where has Mei gone? In the end, according to Cahill, "Nakamura (1997) asserts that the function of *ten* is to attract the reader's attention and stimulate the question, 'Why?'" (Cahill 146).

As it appears now clear, the *Kishōtenketsu* is a rather fluid, not-easy-to-be-defined model. Many scholars, indeed, "advise against arriving at exact definitions of zhuan and ten, appropriately so, in my view, because *qi cheng zhuan he* and *ki shoten ketsu* thereby retain their rich polysemy and metaphoricity" (Cahill 173). Miyazaki makes use of the Kishōtenketsu in this pliable manner. He also makes the overall structure of his movies even more open-ended, complex, and flexible by merging it with the above-mentioned Western influences coming from the story pattern of the Hero's Journey and from traditional fairy-tale tropes. The Japanese filmmaker thus maintains this polysemy embedded in the *Kishōtenketsu* and further expands it, generating complex hybrids.

From the analyses conducted above, we can therefore conclude that Miyazaki's stories represent a clear example of hybridization between Western and Eastern tropes and story structures. Novielli, in her *Floating Worlds: A Short History of Japanese Animation*, similarly argues that oftentimes Studio Ghibli's characters are inspired by both Western and Asian legendary or traditional figures. She also maintains, talking about our same case study, *Spirited Away,* that:

> It is a film full of intersections between different themes: the world of childhood contaminated by adult consumerism, the attention to ecological issues, an osmosis between shintoist elements and other derivatives from the West, and between fantastic and symbolic creatures with references to Western mythologies. Chihiro is also another example of shōjo, an icon of a world halfway between reality and imagination. (Novielli 133)

Indeed, the worlds of Miyazaki interpolate a series of dualisms and distant ideas and concepts. But, as we have noted above, they do so in a non-conflictual way so that the resultant narratives can be easily seen as hybrids between West and Eastern sensibilities. This trend can be spotted also in many other of his movies, where his heroines navigate freely among different cultural traditions and story structures. One example that immediately comes to mind is Nausicaä from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (*Kaze no Tani no Naushika*), who is modeled on the famous princess of the *Odyssey*, and also on the protagonist of an ancient Japanese tale, *The Princess Who Loved Insects (Mushi mezuru himegimi)* from the twelfth century collection *Tales of the Riverside Middle Counselor* (*Tsutsumi chūnagon monogatari*) (see Novielli 127).

In this sense, one last remark can be made about Miyazaki's merging of traditions, cultures, and references. If it is true that there is a widespread use of traditional Western narrative tropes and fairy-tale motifs, there is also the recurrent employment of overt allusions to Lewis Carroll's nonsense masterpieces, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. The initial hostility of the weird creatures Chihiro finds in the spirit world recalls the behaviors and appearance of many Wonderland inhabitants; the focus on losing and then finding again one's proper name is an important theme in *Through the Looking-Glass*, when Alice finds herself in the Woods Where Things Have Names. Also Chihiro's initial crying may recall Alice bursting into tears at the beginning of her Wonderland adventures. In this respect, Zipes even claims that "Chihiro is a contemporary Alice in Wonderland" (*The Enchanted Screen* 386). Mei following a rabbit-shaped creature and then falling down a sort of hole and thus accessing a magical dimension is an obvious re-working of the most famous of *Alice*-related motifs. The *Alice* books are indeed other Western narratives affecting Miyazaki's polyhedric style, but they represent a very peculiar example of Western narratives, one perhaps more akin to the digressive, meandering attitude of Asian stories, with its dream-like style, and its episodic, picaresque narrative development. It cannot be overlooked that one of the most famous riddles in Western literature comes from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: the Mad Hatter's notorious question "why is a raven like a writing-desk?" (73). The riddle famously remains unanswered, powerfully conveying an atmosphere of playfulness, open-endedness, and ambivalence that strongly characterizes Carroll and Miyazaki's stories alike.

HYBRIDIZATION AND COMPLEX NARRATIVES

As we have seen, Miyazaki's stories can be considered as complex hybrids of different cultural traditions, particularly of Western and East Asian story structures and tropes. The very engines of the stories are hybridized, and the Western conflict is blurred by Japanese narrative conventions. As we are going to argue in this section, this hybrid nature of Miyazaki's stories qualifies them as complex and puzzle narratives as narrative riddles, at least from a Westerner perspective.

Complex and puzzle narratives are stories that pose heightened cognitive challenges to their audiences, leaving a sense of puzzlement, confusion, or misunderstanding. The concept found significant fortune in recent academic discourses on a number of media, like film and serial television studies (see e.g. Mitchell; Kiss and Willemsen, *Impossible Puzzle Films*), literary studies (see the various contributions in Grishakova and Poulaki), and video games studies (Bellini). Typical examples of complex movies are *Memento* (Nolan), *Inception* (Nolan), or *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch). The complexity of a narrative depends on its formal organization, that is, by how the story is told (cf. Bellini). Traditionally, complex narratives are those with unnatural flows of time and/or of cause-effect relationships, with multi-linear presentation, multi-plot structures, or presenting large storyworlds with many interconnected elements. In brief, complex are those narratives that in one way or another do not respect the traditional narrative structure to which audiences are accustomed.

From a Westerner perspective, a different story structure and the blurring of the driving engine of conflict is a major disruption of narrative customs. As we have argued, Western narrative traditions are rooted in three-act structures and, in particular, in the Hero's Journey. This is true even more so since Hollywood and US media, two of the dominant cultures of the West, started employing them in a systematic way (at the very least since George Lucas' statement on the use of The Hero's Journey as an inspiration for the first *Star Wars*). In this view, a perfect *Kishōtenketsu* structure could be seen by the Western audience as too much of a disruption, something too distant from the familiar to be appreciated (cf. Kiss and Willemsen, 'Wallowing in Dissonance'). Consequently, it would not qualify only as a complex story, but as a confusing narrative organization - though the line between the two is blurred. A recent study on the impact of different clashing cultural codes in the reception of Japanese animation in the US is particularly interesting in this regard, since it highlights the ambivalent reaction of the American audience, stressing that "the key difference between their successes (or lack thereof) in the American market was that the audience was not prepared well to

engage with Isayama's work, due to the differing cultural code upon which it was based" (Krutiakova 61).[11]

Miyazaki's hybrids can therefore be seen as interesting connubia of the two distant traditions exactly because they *do* resort to both of these traditions therefore achieving just the right amount of unfamiliar, in a still familiar setting. This could be what allows them to reach a "Goldilocks" level of complexity,[12] through the achievement of something similar to the effects of the Freudian Uncanny, a perturbing sense of finding unfamiliar elements in a familiar atmosphere, and the other way around. Napier, too, recognized in Miyazaki's production a "defamiliarisation of the familiar," saying that "Miyazaki takes anime's basic propensity to defamiliarize consensus reality in a direction that allows him to develop his own agenda, one that incorporates an ethical and aesthetic universe that is both exotic and yet at some level familiar" (Napier 279).

This defamiliarization of the familiar can indeed be seen as a complexification of the narratives of the movies, as it molds their formal organization and produces a sense of confusion and puzzlement in the audience. The significant mixture of Western tropes with Asian ones produces, as we have seen, stories that resist description, and that are difficult to summarize (at least for a Western point of view) as the significance or insignificance of their elements is unclear or, better, depends on and varies with the perspectives from which one tries to look at them. Furthermore, the weakening and nuancing of themes that are traditionally central, like conflict, around which Western stories are normally revolving, makes these narratives seem somehow plotless, or even pointless, to some viewers, while still being aesthetically pleasing. In contrast, the inherent variability of the *Kishōtenketsu* structure, and particularly of the *ten*, together with the resultant riddle-like construction of the stories, further puzzles the Western spectator. In this sense, Miyazaki's movies can indeed be defined as embedding complex narratives.

It can also be worth mentioning here what has been recognized as a fundamental difference in Eastern and Western "thought structures." These are obviously generalizations to be used with caveats, but according to several studies in cognitive psychology (see for instance Nisbett, and Nisbett et al.) there is a

11 The study focuses on different case studies, one of them being "Attack on Titan", a Japanese manga series by Hajime Isayama, then become a series.

12 The "Goldilocks" level of complexity can be seen as the amount of complexity that is just about right - posing cognitive challenge the audience in a pleasurable amount, that is not too much and not too little.

marked influence of a "holistic thinking style" (Feng and Park 369) in East Asian culture and thought patterns, while the Western cultural approach would be more analytic, and with a tendency to consider objects and situations as more isolated from each other, with sharp and strong distinctions marking their individual features (an attitude that may foster the individuation of conflictual elements). The two relevant features of the propension for a non-conflictual perspective and the pervasive framework of an interconnectedness between different beings and worlds (see again Feng and Park) can also be seen as the basis of - and, at the same time, as based on - the *Kishōtenketsu* structure and its typical framework of values. Indeed, it is likely that different cognitive styles parallel different mindsets when approaching narratives (cf. Cole & Packer, Nisbett). Interestingly, the most notable difference has been identified exactly between the communities of the two countries object of discussion: Japan and the USA.[13] Miyazaki's use of *Kishōtenketsu* and of the Asian story tropes mixed with the Western ones highlights a complex narrative clash that does not reside only in the formal and textual level of these stories, but one that has a much wider and bigger reach, and finds its roots in different worldviews and sensibilities.

Among our set of case studies, *Spirited Away* is the closest to Western sensibility, as Chihiro's story presents familiar aspects of the *Bildungsroman*. And yet, significant differences are noticeable, as we have seen. This makes the story slightly confusing for the Western audience, who is used to cognitively organizing a story around an overt conflict, functioning as the overall drive of the actions. Rather, this movie presents a situational, almost legislative problem: Chihiro's parents have been turned to pigs not by a malevolent will of a single individual, but rather by a system of rules that governs the world in which they have found themselves. Therefore, coming from an individualistic cognitive style, the Western spectator, for a big portion of the movie, is left wondering who the evil entity is and what are its machinations, although these questions make little sense in the ecology of this story. Indeed, almost all characters have a shapeshifting attitude, which mostly depends on the situation they find themselves in, and often oscillates between helpers and opponents. This makes their status unclear in the mind of the Western spectator who might be somehow familiar with shapeshifters, but in a more marked and less pervasive way, and often with a malicious attitude (cf. Vogler). Even the mostly-benevolent Haku has, in the end, an unclear status, which leaves spectators puzzled regarding his true nature.

13 See the experiment investigating Individualism, the tendency to see individual intentions and dispositions behind one's actions, and Collectivism, the tendency to see one's actions as sprouting from the circumstances in which one is inserted, by Hofstede et al.

In *The Secret World of Arrietty*, the Western spectator similarly does not encounter definite figures and a clear drive as they would in Western-driven plots. Even the figure of Haru, the old lady, has an overall unclear status. While seeming an antagonist to Western viewers, she actually never intends to hurt the Borrowers; her interest seems to be rather of a scientific nature, as she makes sure multiple times to not kill the little ones. This makes her resist the rather easy Western classification of "antagonist". She turns out to be quite close to the Western way of reasoning, or at least of scientific reasoning, which provokes her desire to observe and analyze the Borrowers in a rather imperialistic (and individualistic?) way. She extracts them from their context and observes them in isolation, keeping them prisoners, as if captivity had no influence over them, neglecting their own sensibilities. Even Shō, who we would agree is a positive figure, resists the Western view. While being a helper throughout the story, he is actually the one who causes most if not all troubles to the family, and who forces them to move from their house. As such, he should be conceived as a negative character. However, just as in the previous case, the drive of the story is still situational rather than conflictual; the family knows that it is a survival requirement for their species to act in certain ways – in this case to move – when certain circumstances come to be. In this way, *The Secret World of Arrietty* could be better intended as a documentary of the life and customs of a Borrowers' family, rather than the narration of their story in the Western sense.[14]

Given these premises, it is not surprising to the Western spectator that these stories turn out to be confusing and seemingly almost pointless. In a typical Hollywood movie, Chihiro would have defeated Yubaba and freed all workers of the bathhouse, and Arrietty would have found a way to live peacefully in Shō's dollhouse, in peace with her healed human friend. This does not and cannot happen in Miyazaki's movies because of the peculiar narrative strategies they are based upon; there is no such an easy solution as defeating a witch to change an entire system of values, customs, and beliefs.

Even more confusing and documentary-like (see the aforementioned work of Greenberg) turns out to be *My Neighbor Totoro*, the Miyazaki film that is most distant from Western traditions. As we have already pointed out, while tropes of the West are present, they appear in a sparse and non-systematic way, so that the overall movie looks to us like an ensemble of loosely connected episodes, with the situational issue of an illness. Unsurprisingly, most of the claims of plotlessness

14 It is interesting to note, on the other hand, that even documentaries in the West started to structure their reportage as stories, with conflict as their main drive, in a move diametrically opposed to the one done by Miyazaki for this (and other) narratives.

and of pointlessness are directed to this story, as there are not many apparent changes between the beginning and the end of the story: the sisters' mother is still ill and in the hospital, for one. Characters are generally more defined in their functional status (e.g. Totoro and the old lady are clear helpers), but less so in their ontological one (what is Totoro exactly? Does Totoro even exist?), which leaves spectators riddled and confused. *My Neighbor Totoro* seems also to be the one that draws the most from Western traditions of nonsense, and perhaps unsurprisingly.

Miyazaki's merging of Asian story tropes and different Western influences therefore configures these movies as complex narrative riddles. If we take Ian Hamnett's specification of the cognitive function of riddles, according to which "riddles may be seen as one way of reconciling two divergent sets of concepts or rules of interpretation" (Hamnet 383), then Miyazaki's hybridization perfectly entitles as an objectification of this synthetizing cognitive function. Miyazaki's stories, employing two divergent sets of worldviews, cognitive style, cultural and social schemata, and therefore two diverse rules or customs of interpretations, turn out to be narrative riddles by definition. Their non-systematic and artistic interpolation of this dualism, and the multitude of even contrasting interpretations, make these riddles as complex as they could possibly be.

CONCLUSION

Miyazaki's movies can be considered riddle-stories under different perspectives. The original, unexpected way of dealing with potential conflictual scenarios leads to a representation of conflicts sketched more in the guise of potential riddles, question marks that can or cannot be answered to, without massively affecting the development of the story. Riddles also find their place as *actual* elements in the stories, as ways for the young girl protagonists to look at the world around them with an interrogative, playful attitude. This same interrogative and playful attitude characterizes the pervasive atmosphere of Miyazaki's narratives, through a distinctive juxtaposition of apparently very different and even conflictual worldviews, references to cultural structures, and styles. This juxtaposition and hybridization though does not lead to full-fledged conflicts, but to a unique cognitive reaction of pleasant puzzlement, making Miyazaki's stories work as cognitive riddles for the audience (in our perspective, thus limiting this approach to the Western audience).

In order to reach these conclusions, in this article we have firstly briefly recalled traditional tropes of Western fairy tales, conflict above all, and the two most influential theories of the triadic Hero's Journey and its different unfoldings.

We have identified traces of these traditionally Occidental narrative tropes in three of the most famous movies by the Japanese filmmaker and scriptwriter Hayao Miyazaki - namely *Spirited Away*, *The Secret World of Arrietty* and *My Neighbor Totoro*, and shown how Miyazaki treat conflicts here more as potential riddles than as open clashes. We have then presented a short description of the traditional Asian narrative structure of the *Kishōtenketsu*. Similarly to what done for Western tropes, we have looked for elements directly connectable to *Kishōtenketsu* in our three selected movies, and linked them to riddles and open questions. Through this double analysis, we have identified in clearer traits a process of hybridization between these two distant traditions - often seen as a signature trait of Miyazaki's productions: "If there is a community implicit in the Ghibli-brand address to the world, it is one full of ambivalent fascination for traditions in general, for other worlds and other futures" (Lamarre 98).

We have then introduced the recent paradigm of narrative complexity and cognitive puzzlement and we have highlighted in more particular terms how our three selected movies pose a heightened cognitive challenge to the Western audience, in particular because of the structure of their narratives, and because of their characters' construction. We have then discussed how Miyazaki's movies could therefore challenge spectators' cognitive reactions exactly because of his bringing together Asian and Western narrative structures and traditions, representing in this way complex narrative riddles.

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