

How does *Witch of the Forest* draw comparisons with the works of Studio Ghibli to create a familiar style as an original film?

Introduction

The works of Studio Ghibli are known internationally for their unique style and familiar themes, making it both desirable and challenging to use their films to inform new works such as *Witch of the Forest*. Named ‘the finest animation company today’ by Odell and Le Blanc,¹ and the recipient of ‘numerous awards and critical acclaim’ along with four consecutive Academy Award nominations,² Studio Ghibli are notably the most well-known Eastern film company in the Western world. Particularly the works of Hayao Miyazaki (big names including films such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Howl’s Moving Castle*, and, the highest-grossing film in Japan, *Spirited Away*)³ are common titles all over the world – and, particularly notable for this comparison, in the United Kingdom. Since Studio Ghibli and Miyazaki have, what Rendell and Denison call, a clear ‘consistency in character design, backgrounds and movement aesthetics’,⁴ *Witch of the Forest* uses parts of these familiar elements to inspire characters, settings, and stories which evoke a similar style. While there are clear diversions from these at moments, *Witch of the Forest* is influenced by the intentions and effects of a Ghibli film, using these ideas to create a story that feels familiar and safe, yet still engaging and intriguing.

Characters

¹ Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, ed. by Hannah Patterson, 3rd edn (Harpenden: Kamera, 2019), p. 3

² Anon, ‘About – Studio Ghibli’, <https://ghiblicollection.com/about> [accessed 05 July 2021]

³ Ibid.

⁴ James Rendell and Ryna Denison, ‘Introducing Studio Ghibli’, *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 4:1 (2018), 1-13 (p. 2)

The characters of a Studio Ghibli film work to establish many of the themes and events that play out in the story, and *Witch of the Forest*, in order to echo these same sentiments, draws many similarities. The presence of anthropomorphic or talking animals is a common sight in Ghibli films, and, particularly inspired by Jiji the cat in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, Darwin the crow in *Witch of the Forest* accompanies Maggie as her companion and, often, voice of reason. Not only does he represent her only friend in the world at the beginning of the film, and highlight her loneliness now that she lives all alone, but he can also present an outside perspective on Maggie's plight and offer her advice – that she may or may not take.

Maggie herself represents a typical Ghibli character, which is a young female protagonist. She has what Odell and Le Blanc describe as 'a privileged viewpoint that sees what an adult can't, or won't, see',⁵ and is able to think critically about the new people and places she discovers throughout the film, though is plagued by uncertainty and vulnerability. However, just like Chihiro, Kiki, Sophie or Anna (from *Spirited Away*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Howl's Moving Castle* and *When Marnie was There* respectively), she discovers her confidence and learns how to grow in a way that heals both her and the world around her, following the classic structure of a coming-of-age story that Ghibli regularly employs. She manages to keep her childlike joy and wonder, but discovers her confidence and abilities were much greater than they were at the start of her journey, allowing her to affect the people, things and places around her. We see this literally at the end of *Witch of the Forest*, where Maggie develops the power to physically move the earth beneath her, growing the ground into a cliff which prevents the flood from drowning her and the villagers.

⁵ Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, p. 14

Aesthetics

As many's first exposure to Japanese anime, the aesthetic of the Ghibli films immediately springs to mind as its unique style fingerprint. This animated drawing style provides an effective platform for the fantasy and magical realism elements of the Ghibli films, and a similar style is intended for *Witch of the Forest*. Key examples of this art style are recognisable in Ghibli's watercolour palettes, with brighter, more vivid colours often being the greens of nature. Aesthetically, nature is heavily featured, clearly present in key or emotional moments, and presented with a keen eye for detail: the audience sees 'the realistic, if impressionistic, way that wind moves through fields of grass, and in the way the first few drops of rain in a shower darken patches on a pathway', Rendell and Denison quote from McCarthy and Cavallaro.⁶ The heavily featured presence of natural greenery is also key within *Witch of the Forest*, as the forest is the home of the titular character, Maggie. Moments such as the start of a rainfall or a sudden gust of wind are essential to the telling of the story, often carrying more weight than simply the natural weather by causing magical intervention. There are three key 'zones' within *Witch of the Forest*: the forest, the village, and the mountain. Each presents very different situations for Maggie, with the forest, her home, being her safe haven to return to after moments of danger. The clear aesthetic focus on the natural, especially at the start of the screenplay, gives the audience opportunity to develop their own feelings of familiarity and safety within the forest, highlighting the change in tone as Maggie discovers the village and the focus of the action shifts from the environment to the people around her. *Witch of the Forest* does take inspiration from 'Miyazaki's ... marriage of consistent ... themes to these aesthetics',⁷ using the images within the films to suggest similar associations to the audience. In this way, it is advantageous to remain faithful to Miyazaki's rulebook here, as it means that *Witch of the*

⁶ Rendell and Denison, 'Introducing Studio Ghibli' (p. 4)

⁷ Rendell and Denison, 'Introducing Studio Ghibli' (p. 3)

Forest's audience will, to some degree, be familiar with these associations and themes, and readily accept them.

Themes

One of the key themes suggested through Miyazaki's aesthetic style is the presence of magic in a seemingly mundane world, encouraging audiences to believe in good in the world that they may not be able to see. This is noticeable in numerous Ghibli films, but particularly *Spirited Away*, *My Neighbor Totoro* and *When Marnie was There*, which begin in the 'normal' world and travel into the 'magical' world, often via a particularly journey or portal. It is common, therefore, for these two worlds to be existing side by side, both aware of but distant from the other. This is the premise for Maggie's situation in *Witch of the Forest*: that the Witches and the humans live in isolation from each other, both aware of the others' existence but maintaining distance from them. Only by rejecting the forest and travelling through the protective shield of trees does Maggie finally discover the world of the humans' village, and the humans feel the effect of the Witches' magic once more. In a reverse of the aforementioned films, though, Maggie begins in the magical world and has to travel into the human one with the help of her guide, Giselle. This reflects Ghibli films *Ponyo* and *Arrietty*, both written by Miyazaki. Through this, Maggie's forest, while magical, feels safe and secure to the audience, and it is the mundane human village that feels dangerous – until, of course, both worlds collide and Maggie and the humans finally make peace with one another.

The power of the social community, and of unlikely groups rallying together, is an important theme most notably featured in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, one of the films that most closely inspired *Witch of the Forest*. In both stories, a young Witch arrives in an unfamiliar town and struggles to gain acceptance

from the people there. In both cases, one person (Osono to Kiki, Erin to Maggie) offers kindness and friendship, inspiring her to forgive the initial struggles and give the townspeople a second chance. This theme of close-knit community could be traced back to Miyazaki's experiences growing up in post-WW2 Japan,⁸ the events of much of his young life,⁹ but carries through to today as a statement of the importance of a support network, while highlighting that no one is simply 'good' or 'bad', but, as Odell and Le Blanc explain, even villains are 'complex characters with believable motivations'.¹⁰ This is an important lesson that Maggie learns through *Witch of the Forest*, as she discovers that the humans that she feared are simply trying to protect themselves, and, once they understand that Maggie is trying to help them and not hurt them, they are able to welcome her into the village. Befriending Erin and Bellamy and feeling like a part of the village's community encourages Maggie to risk her own safety in order to save the village, despite knowing that these are the same people that killed and cast out the rest of her Witch clan. *Witch of the Forest* does mirror *Kiki's Delivery Service* closely once more, with a scene after Maggie/Kiki has risked her life for the town, where the townspeople emerge to applaud and thank her for doing so. While Ghibli does not always have feelgood themes like this, the generally 'optimistic conclusion' that Odell and Le Blanc identify makes for a positive and satisfying resolution to the story,¹¹ and neatly suggests the acceptance of our Witch into her new community.

As identified within the social community, a vital part of this is the theme of friendship and love.

Miyazaki has spoken about the power of love in his films rather than romance, explaining, 'I want to

⁸ Anon, 'Japanese Labor After World War II', <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/japanese-labor-after-world-war-ii> [accessed 11 December 2021]

⁹ Anon, 'Hayao Miyazaki – Biography – IMDb', <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0594503> [accessed 11 December 2021]

¹⁰ Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, p. 9

¹¹ Ibid.

portray a slightly different relationship, one where the two mutually inspire each other to live'.¹² This kind of love is heart-wrenchingly depicted in many Ghibli films, perhaps most clearly in *When Marnie was There*, where Marnie's joyful spirit brings out the joy in depressed protagonist Anna. In *Witch of the Forest*, Maggie is first presented with fellow Witch Giselle, and the two of them form an immediately strong relationship, as they use the other as a replacement for their dead clan. However, as Giselle's hatred of the human village is revealed, Maggie begins to distance from her and instead finds her Miyazaki 'true expression of love' in Erin,¹³ who risks her life and her village's detestation by untying Maggie and saving her from the tidal wave that destroys the village. Similar to the character of Sho in *Arrietty*, who encourages Arrietty to talk to him and protects her and her family, Erin, after it is discovered that Maggie is a Witch, continues to be her friend and strives to help her against the wishes of her community. In both films, it is these actions that begin to turn the tide. Having seen Erin accept Maggie, the rest of the village feel comfortable following suit.

This links in to a common thread of Ghibli films, which is that children are often the people to discover magic. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, it is the two young girls, Satsuki and Mei, who journey through the woods and find Totoro; Chihiro, and not her parents, find the magical bathhouse in *Spirited Away*; Anna is the only one to see Marnie's abandoned house with its lights on in *When Marnie was There*. As Odell and Le Blanc explain, 'Children are more open to the kind of fantastical worlds that are often portrayed, unencumbered by the materialism that often infects their parents'.¹⁴ As Yoshioka notes that *Nausicaa of*

¹² Lucy Jones, "'It's good to be alive": The Studio Ghibli films are coming to Netflix at just the right time', <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/studio-ghibli-netflix-movies-my-neighbor-totoro-spirited-away-princess-mononoke-miyazaki-a9297181.html> [accessed 11 December 2021]

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, p. 13

the Valley of the Wind, and subsequent Ghibli films, ‘succeeded in appealing to adult audiences’,¹⁵ it may seem unwise to so clearly demonstrate that magic is something for only children. However, Odell and Le Blanc go on to add, a child protagonist is ‘an avatar for adult wish fulfilment, offering possibilities for a return to youth’.¹⁶ It encourages youthful hope in all who watch. This is why it is Erin who is able to find Maggie, why it is Maggie who stands as the last remaining survivor of the forest’s clan, and why the older Giselle is unable to make peace with the village: it is the children who know how to find the magic in the world – including the magical in the mundane, such as forgiveness, kindness, and hope.

Plot Events

Many of the classic Ghibli themes influence identifiable moments within the story. Therefore, it is important to touch on not only the theme itself, but the way that it manifests as a clear event within the film. One of Miyazaki’s most tangible themes is freedom, and, in his films, it manifests in flight. Both *Kiki’s Delivery Service* and *The Wind Rises* use the motif of flight to symbolise, in Kiki’s case, progression into a new life, and, in Jiro’s, escape from his current one. As defined by Odell and Le Blanc, flying ‘[serves] as a metaphor for growing up or showing that sometimes freedom comes at a price’, and ‘[shows a character] the world from a different perspective’,¹⁷ allowing them to see their problems or situation more clearly. In *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, Kiki loses her magical ability to fly as she is overwhelmed with doubt in her powers, and only through self-reflection and the need to save her friend Tombo does she regain it. Similarly, in *Witch of the Forest*, Maggie is unable to perform ‘unnatural’ magic such as

¹⁵ Shiro Yoshioka, ‘Toshio’s Movie Castle: A Historical Overview of Studio Ghibli’s Collaboration and Promotional Strategies’, *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 4:1 (2018), 13-32 (pp. 22-23)

¹⁶ Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, p. 14

¹⁷ Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, p. 13

flying, preferring to stay within her safe magic of potions and herbs. She watches Giselle perform elemental air magic, and is shocked at its dramatic results. However, when she needs to race to the village and warn them about the incoming flood, she manipulates the air to carry her there faster, and is surprised by her own ability to fly. This ties in with the coming-of-age story of *Witch of the Forest* and many Ghibli films, generally dictated by the young age of their protagonists, and also carries the lesson that gaining confidence in yourself will lead you to achieve things you once thought scary or impossible.

One of the most commonly discussed symbols in Miyazaki's Ghibli films is the relationship between humans and the environment, which is a significant theme throughout *Witch of the Forest*. Miyazaki's environmentalism stance is not black-and-white, and Odell and Le Blanc identify that, while exploiting nature is often implied to be an immoral action, the nature-loving protagonists will use the same technologies and create pollution just as other characters in the stories.¹⁸ In this way, there is no one true answer as to how to interact with the environment in the Ghibli films, but intention can be read into the actions of the characters. In *Princess Mononoke*, the great boar god Nago and the Great Forest Spirit are both killed, and the theft of their heads causes the natural world to attack the people who killed them, and, in the case of the Great Forest Spirit, even attack the forest itself. This notion of the karmic nature of the environment manifests in the form of the Witches in *Witch of the Forest*. While they are not gods, or Great Forest Spirits, the Witches represent the stewardship of nature and the relationship of all things to the nature where they came from, inspired by the mythology of Ancient Greek nymphs. This relationship is shown through Maggie discovering cuts, bruises and burns as the trees in the forest are harmed, and links her directly to the natural world that the humans in the village are damaging. Similarly, for Giselle and her clan of Witches, who sacrificed themselves in order to save her and her mountain that was being destroyed. In the other direction, the trees are able to sense and

¹⁸ Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, pp. 11-12

understand Maggie's thoughts and needs, and protect her from danger without being asked. She and the forest have a mutually beneficial relationship, where each party works to protect the other from harm, and she finds companionship in Erin for their shared views on nature. A significant environmental disaster, then, can be the result of being treated poorly by the humans, as an act of punishment or revenge. Giselle manifests this humanly, by cracking open the mountain and causing the flood, rather than through Miyazaki's natural, less personal, consequences. The moral, however, remains the same: to treat the environment around you with respect and care, lest it gain the power to cause damage and harm to you.

Conclusion

Witch of the Forest has numerous elements that evoke familiarity with a wide range of Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli films. Ghibli's films, however, are praised and discussed for their differences – for never making the same film twice. In this way, it is impossible to describe *Witch of the Forest* as completely original. However, by consciously choosing to echo, ignore, or adapt identifiably Ghibli elements, *Witch of the Forest* is able to create, much as Studio Ghibli does with its every film, something unique. It is not a carbon copy of any one film, and benefits from the many films that have inspired moments, themes and elements within it. Particularly with its English roots, its characters speak with their own voices, and this writing style distances it from Miyazaki and Ghibli's works.

What *Witch of the Forest* aims to do, though, is realise the feelings of safety and familiarity that an audience feels when they sit down to a Studio Ghibli film, and manifest those within its own audience.

Finally, at its core, it and Miyazaki's works are truly the same, because, as Miyazaki puts it: 'I would like to make a film to tell children: it's good to be alive'.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lucy Jones, "It's good to be alive": The Studio Ghibli films are coming to Netflix at just the right time'

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