Miyazaki and the West: A Comparative Analysis of Narrative Structure in Animated Films for Children

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Sibel ÇELİK NORMAN

anadolu üniversitesi, iletişim bilimleri fakültesi
scnorma@anadolu.edu.tr

Özet

Miyazaki ve Batı: Çocuklar için Yapılan Animasyon Filmlerindeki Anlatım Yapısının Karşılaştırmalı bir Analizi

Bu makale, 1994 ve 2006 yılları arasında Disney ve Dreamworks gibi yapım şirketleri tarafından çocuklar için yapılmış olan animasyon filmleri arasından seçilen filmlerin analizini yapmakta ve sonuçları dünya çapında bir seyirciye sahip yegane Japon animasyon filmleri olan Hayao Miyazaki tarafından yazılıp yönetilmiş ve yapımcılığını Studio Ghibli'nin yaptığı filmler ile paralel bir şekilde analiz ederek karşılaştırmaktadır. Bu incelemede Rus halkbilimci Vladimir Propp'un yaklaşımının yönlendirici-liğiyle Propp'un "fonksiyon" olarak adlandırdığı önemli anlatım öğeleri tespit edilmiş ve sınıflandırılmıştır. Sınıflandırmanın sonuçları "batı" animasyon örneklerinde yaygın olan genel öğelerin Stüdyo Ghibli filmlerinin anlatımlarının büyük kısmında yer almadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca bu inceleme, iki grup filmin ideolojik amaç açısından farklılığını da ortaya çıkarmaktadır: birkaç istisna dışında batı örnekleri, tipik hoşgörü ve dayanışma idealleriyle bir topluluk ya da ailenin önceliğini vurgularken Ghibli yapımları, geniş biçimde ekolojik bir bağlam içinde birçok açıdan daha geleneksel olan iyi ve kötü temsilcileri arasındaki mücadeleye bağlı kalmaktadır. Bu bulgulardan elde edilen çıkarımlar, geleneksel anlatım araçları ve çocuklar için yaratıcı sinemasal hikâye anlatımı arasındaki ilişki açısından incelenmiştir.

anahtar kelimeler: *animasyon, çocuk filmleri, anlatım (yapısı) analizi, genel eğilim*

Résumé

Miyazaki et l'ouest: une analyse comparative de la structure narrative dans les film d'animation pour les enfants

Cet article contient une analyse de certains films d'animation pour les enfants produites par des sociétés de production tels que Disney et Dreamworks entre 1994 et 2006, et compare les résultats avec ceux d'un analyse parallèle de films écrit et réalisé par Hayao Miyazaki et produit par le Studio Ghibli au Japon, les seuls films d'animation japonais avec un même public mondial. L'analyse est guidée par l'approche de la folkloriste russe Vladimir Propp dans l'identification et la classification des principaux éléments narratifs, appelés par Propp fonctions. Les résultats de la classification indiquent que les éléments génériques communs aux exemples d'animation « occidentales » sont largement absents dans les récits des films Studio Ghibli. L'analyse révèle également une disparité dans l'intention idéologique des deux groupes de films: exemples de l'ouest, avec quelques exceptions, souligne la primauté du groupe ou la famille, avec leurs caractéristique idéales de tolérance et de solidarité, tandis que les productions Ghibli adhèrent à une lutte plus traditionnelles entre les représentants du bien et du mal, dans un large contexte écologique. Les implications de ces conclusions sont examinées sous l'angle de la relation entre les dispositifs narratifs classiques et d'imagination cinématographique d'histoires pour les enfants.

mots-clés: animation, films pour les enfants, analyse narrative, convention générique

Abstract

The essay undertakes an analysis of selected animated films for children produced by production companies such as Disney and Dreamworks between 1994 and 2006, and compares the results with those of a parallel analysis of films written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki and produced by Studio Ghibli in Japan, the only Japanese animated films with a similarly global audience. The analysis is guided by the approach of the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp in the identification and tabulation of key narrative elements, which Propp termed 'functions'. The results of the tabulation indicate that the generic elements common to the 'western' animated examples are largely absent from the narratives of the Studio Ghibli films. The analysis also reveals a disparity in the ideological intention of the two groups of films: the western examples, with few exceptions, emphasise the primacy of the group or family, with their characteristic ideals of tolerance and solidarity, while the Ghibli productions adhere to what is in many respects a more traditional struggle between the representatives of good and evil, within a broadly ecological context. The implications of these findings are examined in terms of the relationship between conventional narrative devices and imaginative cinematic storytelling for children.

keywords: *animation, children's film, narrative analysis, generic convention*

Introductory

The animated feature film for children is assumed to constitute a distinct film genre, on the basis of mode of production (cel animation or claymation) and primary target audience. What is referred to is thus a 'commercial genre': for the animation studios, there is the need to satisfy an existing (and growing) global audience with expectations born of a long series of previous films of this kind. Both producers and viewers are looking for something to equal the appeal of *The Lion King* or surpass the ingenuity of *Toy Story*. Film criticism, for its part, approaches animated features as a generic body of work in which the major distinctions are technical: the quality of the drawing or modelling, the depth and realism of the landscapes and the sophistication of the computer-generated imagery (Brophy 1994; Bendazzi 1996; Wells 1998). Less attention is paid to narrative structure, analysis of which tends to be reserved for historical and critical genres such as the Western, Film Noir and Melodrama.

This essay examines a selection of recent features released by major western producers of animated films for children in order to determine whether common narrative elements or motifs can be identified and to match the results against a parallel analysis for the films produced by Studio Ghibli, written and directed by the Japanese auteur Hayao Miyazaki, enabling conclusions to be reached regarding the effect and consequences of established narrative conventions of the genre. The choice of a single Japanese filmmaker, Miyazaki, to be compared with a range of American filmmakers, is determined by the fact that his works, alone among Japanese animated films, enjoy worldwide distribution and command essentially the same audiences as the western examples.

For the comparison between the productions of Disney, Dreamworks, Fox, Kanbar and Sony Animation on the one hand and Studio Ghibli on the other to be appropriate, original contemporary stories only are examined, on the grounds that the narratives of folk tales such as *Beauty and the Beast or Aladdin*, or of literary classics such as *Treasure Island* (as in the film *Treasure Planet*) are inherited, to a large extent, from earlier versions. An exception is made in the case of *Hoodwinked* (Kanbar, 2005), a re-telling of Red Riding Hood in which the links with the original tale are tenuous and even key elements of the narrative have been altered: the wolf, for example, is no longer the villain and the grandmother emerges as a practitioner of extreme sports. The sequels to *The Lion King*, *Shrek*, *Toy Story* and *Ice Age* are also excluded from the study, since the settings, characters and general tenor of the stories are pre-determined by the originals. Further selection criteria are a degree of commercial success, measured in international box-office receipts, and the desirability of a representative range of production companies. The selection of films is listed in Table 1. All the 'western' films were released in the years

between 1994 and 2006; three of the Ghibli productions date from the 1980s. Throughout the essay, the appellation 'western' has been used as a convenient shorthand for the non-Ghibli films.

Theoretical Approach

A brief explanation of the methodological approach is necessary to define the usage of such terms as narrative elements and motifs, narrative structure, and generic conventions. All of these were employed by Vladimir Propp as early as 1924 in his seminal work 'Morphology of the Folktale' (*Morfológija Skázki*). Propp explained that 'the word morphology means the study of *forms*', expressing the 'original intention' of his work as 'an investigation not only of the morphological, but also of the logical, structure peculiar to the tale, which laid the groundwork for the tale as myth' (Propp 1927/1968: author's foreword). The first English edition of Propp's book became available in 1958, three years after the publication of Lévi-Strauss's article *The Structural Study of Myth.* The exchanges between Lévi-Strauss and Propp in the 1960s, centring on the distinction between 'formalism' and 'structuralism' noted by Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1976:115) ensured that Propp's work would become an integral item of the structuralist debate, first in mythology and, ultimately in film studies. The details of the debate, the distinctions drawn between the paradigmatic and the syntactic approach to the study of myth and story, and the 'revisions' of Propp by Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas and Bremond, need not concern us here. What concerns our present purpose is Propp's conclusion - never seriously challenged by his critics and 'revisers' - that the options of the authors of imaginative stories (whether novelist or scenarist) are limited, not in terms of theme or setting, but in terms of what Propp called the 'functions' of the *dramatis personae*, and thus also - to a degree - of the nature and role of the main characters. It is this widely-accepted hypothesis that ultimately forms the theoretical basis for the identification of conventional narrative 'structures'.

David Bordwell summarised Propp's aim as follows: 'to define a certain form of fairy tale, the "heroic wondertale", by breaking it down into thirty-one functions, various auxiliaries, seven roles, and a limited set of "moves" or lines of action' (Bordwell, 1989: 198). According to Propp, 'functions constitute the basic elements of the tale, those actions upon which the course of the tale is built' (Propp 1924/68: 71). In responding to the criticisms of Lévi-Strauss, he amplified the definition: 'Function (…) denotes the action of the character from the point of view of its significance for the progress of the narrative'. By way of example, he explained that when the hero jumps to the princess's window on horseback, the function is not the jump itself but the performance of a difficult task as part of courtship. Similarly, if an eagle takes the hero to the country of the princess, the function is the transfer to the place where the object of the search is located. 'I called such stable elements the functions of the characters

(...) they turned out to be few, their forms many, the sequence always the same. A picture of surprising regularity has been obtained' (Propp 1984: 73/4). The existence of 'stable elements' has not been denied by later commentators, and a similar approach was adopted by Lévi-Strauss in his analysis of myths. The present essay carries out a 'structural analysis' based on these stable elements but concerns itself only with their narrative significance, as in the original Proppian scheme, without examination of what Bordwell refers to as 'symptomatic' overtones (Bordwell 1989: 9ff). The proto-Lacanian adaptation of Propp's work by Peter Wollen, for instance, which relates 'morphological analysis' to psychoanalytic concepts by linking Propp's concept of 'lack' (of a bride, a friend, wealth) specifically to subconscious desire (Wollen 1982: 32) lie beyond the scope of this essay. Finally, the term *'motif'* was defined by Liberman as 'a minimal narrative unit or a familiar figure (a wicked stepmother) or a familiar object (seven-league boots, a cap of invisibility' (Propp 1984: xxvii). Repeated patterns of 'elements' and 'motifs' provide an adequate basis for what genre critics such as Alloway and McArthur call 'the iconography of the genre' and for the identification of generic conventions as summarised in Steven Neale's comprehensive discussion of this issue (Neale 2000: 13-16).

The Lion King

The Lion King (Disney, 1994), both the earliest and, on an inflation-adjusted basis, the most commercially successful of the selected 'western' animated features is here employed as a model for how the narrative can be analysed following the Proppian model. The narrative of the film is divisible into six parts: (i) the initial idyll: a settled and prosperous kingdom, ruled by a good king with an affectionate relationship with his son and heir, Simba; (ii) the father cautions his son not to go near the elephants' graveyard, but Simba ignores the caution, at the instigation of his uncle, Scar; (iii) Scar engineers a life-threatening situation for the young Simba and in the ensuing drama pushes the father to his death; (iii) forced into exile, Simba keeps company with a warthog and a meercat (Pumba and Timon), who teach him the pleasure of a carefree existence; (iv) the now grown-up Simba is reminded of his responsibilities by a chance meeting with his childhood playmate, Nala, and the appearance of his dead father's image reflected in the river; (v) he returns to challenge the usurping uncle, and defeats him in battle; (vi) the kingdom is restored, Simba marries Nala and an heir is born.

Propp emphasised that only a certain number of his thirty-one detailed functions were to be found in each tale, and Greimas has suggested that the number could be reduced, by a process of rationalisation and compression, to twenty (Greimas 1966: 194). In the narrative of *The Lion King* as outlined above, eleven of Propp's functions can be readily recognised: an interdiction is addressed to the hero (numbered 'II' by Propp); the interdiction is violated (III);

the villain causes harm to a member of a family (VI); the banished hero is dispatched (IX); the hero leaves home (XI); the hero arrives in another country, unrecognised (XXIII); the hero acquires the use of a magical agent (XIV - the agent, according to Propp, may 'appear of its own accord', as in the 'magical' apparition of the dead father); the hero returns (XX); the hero and the villain engage in direct combat (XVI); the villain is defeated (XVIII); the hero is married and ascends the throne (XXXI). It will be noted that some of these are misplaced according to Propp's rigid sequence, but the essential structure emerges: an interdiction ignored; death of the King at the hands of his brother; the hero's exile; the magical intervention; the return, the combat and the restoration. Of Propp's seven principal characters, four or five at least are present. Simba evidently belongs to Propp's category of 'victimised hero' (as opposed to 'seeker'). The father and the villain are present. The helper may be either Nala the lioness, or Pumba and Timon. The 'donor' is more problematic, but there is an implication that the wise monkey who charts Simba's exile and foresees his return is the source of whatever magical help exists. The 'dispatcher', in this case, is identical with the villain, who commands Simba to leave the kingdom, accusing him of responsibility for his father's death. Missing is the 'false hero', a figure who nevertheless does appear in other animated films, notably *Shrek 2.*

It is not to be expected that the narratives of late twentieth century animated films for children should conform in every respect, or even in most respects, to those of medieval Russian wonder tales, but it is clear from the above that *The Lion King* is susceptible to a similar kind of structural analysis. The issue now to be addressed is whether the major narrative elements present in *The Lion King* are also to be found in the remaining examples of western animated films, and to identify any additional generic elements.

Narrative Elements in the 'Western' Films

All the films except three initially depict a benign, prosperous, apparently settled *status quo*. In each case, the idyll is disturbed by an unforeseen event. The contented creatures of *Ice Age* are threatened by the coming of the ice; the easy life of the animals in *Barnyard* is jolted by the death of their leader; the domestic bliss of the fish family in *Finding Nemo* is shattered by the attack of the predator and the death of the mother; in *A Bug's Life*, the loss of the tribute payable to the grasshoppers threatens the survival of the ants. In *Toy Story*, the harmony of the toyroom is interrupted by the arrival of Bud Lightyear, and in *Open Season* Boog's comfortable existence is disturbed by the appearance of the one-antlered elk. In *Madagascar*, the disturbance is caused by the restless dissatisfaction of one individual, a zebra. In each case, the unforeseen event requires a journey, which may be a quest, a pursuit or an escape. The animals of *Ice Age* must migrate; the zoo animals of *Madagascar* set off in search of their companion; in *Shrek*, the ogre and the donkey are on a quest to rescue a

princess. The resulting journey or voyage occupies the central part of the action and includes conflict with 'the enemy', which may involve one-to-one combat with the villains or chief villain (*Barnyard, Ice Age , Open Season*).

The 'return' heralds a restitution of the status quo and/or the redemption of one of the central characters, the reuniting of 'the family', or marriage. The prosperous kingdom in *The Lion King* is restored and Simba marries Nala; Otis the bull 'marries' Daisy the Cow in *Barnyard*; *Shrek* marries Princess Fiona; Flik also marries the princess in *A Bug's Story*. Alex the Lion in *Madagascar*, Otis the bull in *Barnyard*, Boog the bear in *Open Season* and Diego the sabre-toothed tiger in *Ice Age* redeem themselves by displays of courage, as does the pleasure-loving Simba in *The Lion King*. Father and son are reunited in *Finding Nemo*.

The element of redemption is closely associated with the formation or cementing of *the group,* an element common to eight of the twelve selected films (see Table 1) and peripheral in a further two or three. There are essentially two kinds of group. The first is the extended group which constitutes the community as a whole - the farm animals of the *Barnyard*, the woodland creatures of *Over the Hedge*, the zoo animals of *Madagascar*, the threatened animals of *Ice Age* , the toys of the *Toy Story* playroom. Secondly, there is the smaller group which is formed for the purpose of, or during, the journey. The simplest form of this group is the pair, Boog the bear and the one-antlered elk in *Open Season*, *Shrek* and the donkey, Nemo's father and Doreen, and Woody and Bud in *Toy Story*. Next come the threesome and foursomes: the mammoth, the sloth and the sabre-toothed tiger in *Ice Age* ; Simba, Timon and Pumba in *The Lion King*; the lion, zebra, giraffe and hippopotamus in *Madagascar*; Sullivan, Wazowski and Boo in *Monsters Inc*. These groups provide security, companionship, a sense of belonging, parallel to the 'real-life' function of the gangs and companies of childhood.

So characteristic is the formation of this group that it may be regarded as a key element in the narrative, one that constitutes a recognisable departure from the pattern analysed by Propp. The difference can be simply expressed: a journey taken alone, as in the wondertales, may signify (perhaps did originally signify in the medieval folk tales) the journey of the individual soul through life, a pilgrim's progress. Propp argued, indeed, that 'initiation is the oldest basis of the wondertale' (Propp 184, 117). Incidents and encounters on the journey therefore had a special importance in the life of the individual, an effect that is naturally diluted or removed in the case of a company. In the animated films, the importance of the group is underscored by its connection to the final resolution of the tale. There may be, as we have seen, restoration of the status quo, there may even be marriage, but what is common to all the films is the restitution and/or preservation of the group, which is consonant with the *family*. The

targeting of Disney's animated films at family audiences is a point requiring no elaboration but, as Forgacs points out, the emphasis on 'the myth of family togetherness' has been a gradual development in the commercial strategy of the studio, recently intensified (Forgacs 1992: 362/3).

The identification of the group with the family is implicit in most films and explicit in some. In *Ice Age* , the notion of the family is explicit in the group from the beginning, underlined by the fact that Sid is apparently the last of the woolly mammoths, and the sloth has lost his own pack during the confusion of migration. Diego the sabre-toothed tiger comes first as a spy and eventually stays on as a member of the group, the identity of which as a family is reinforced by their 'adoption' of a human child, caring for which becomes the group's major task. The 'orphaned' sloth continually talks about how a family acts, what a family means. This *Ice Age* group - mammoth, tiger, sloth - may serve as a model for the series of more-or-less dysfunctional 'families' in children's animated films (dysfunctional in the colloquial sense - a family that argues, a family with problems). Its 'dysfunctional' nature is highlighted by the odd combinations of animals: hippo, giraffe, tiger, lion; meerkat, warthog, lion; ogre and donkey (joined in *Shrek 2* by a French Puss-in-Boots). The selection of animal-types is doubtless made with a view to comic potential, but a more serious intention is also likely: to convey the principle of inclusiveness and tolerance. The peculiar, and often irritating, characteristics of some of the animals must be endured by their colleagues: garrulousness (the donkey, the elk, the sloth), boastfulness (Alex the lion), an offensive odour (the warthog, the skunk), hypochondria (the giraffe), even treachery and cowardice (the sabre-toothed tiger). A moral lesson is implicit in the maintenance of these disparate groupings: the stability and contentment of a family can only be achieved through tolerance of each other's foibles.

In *Over the Hedge*, the narrative is built around the attempts of a raccoon to trick a group of woodland creatures into gathering food which he intends stealing from them in order to repay an angry bear. He redeems himself by rescuing them from 'the enemy' (the Verminator) and is received into the family. At the end of the film, there is the following exchange between the family's leader, a tortoise, and the raccoon.
'We would have given you the food if we'd known why you needed it.'
'You would? Really?'
'That's what families do.'
'I've never been part of anything like that.'
'Believe me it's the gateway to the good life.'
'I never understood.'
'Poor communication. That's also part of being a family. … You wanna be part of it?'

The dialogue is revealing, not only in its definition of family but its admission that families have shortcomings. The acceptance by the tribe of the raccoon is conditional on his willingness to subordinate selfish concerns to the collective interest, which is more important than individual weaknesses. The restoration or affirmation of the group at the end of the films is characteristic. In *Madagascar*, the rift between the lion and the zebra is healed and the 'family' is reunited. In *Toy Story*, the rivalry between Woody and Bud is resolved and they both rejoin the wider group. 'Families' are also reunited in *The Lion King*, *Finding Nemo* and in *Barnyard*, the final scene is a gathering of the community around the stall where Daisy the cow gives birth.

With the exception of *Toy Story* and *Monsters Inc.*, the films are peopled by talking animals, in other words by figures with the shape, and to a degree the movements, of animals, but the speech and character traits of human beings. These characters are loosely referred to by critics as anthropomorphic animals (see for example Forgacs 1992: 363-5), but it would be more accurate to refer to them as zoomorphic humans. The device has precedents which date back in children's literature at least to Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894), screened by Disney in 1967. It has since been adopted as the preferred method of engaging the interest of children and offering an almost endless variety of shapes, movements and gestures among the characters. The variety, however, conceals a limited number of types: the cowardly or reluctant hero, the aggressive villain or villains, the talkative hanger-on (the donkey, the sloth, the elk), to which the voice of actor Eddie Murphy (the donkey in *Shrek* as well as the dragon in *Mulan*) has given a recognisable timbre. The function of this character is akin to the jester of Shakespearean plays: he provides the comic relief but also acts as a foil to his more serious fellow or fellows. There may even be a kind of wisdom in his wit.

With the single exception of *Monsters Inc.*, the principal heroes of the narratives are male, although the groups generally include female members, some of whom are depicted as resourceful and decisive (Dora in Finding Nemo, the hippo in *Madagascar*). The virtual absence of heroines is difficult to account for, given their regular occurrence in fairy tales as well as in contemporary media productions as a whole. One explanation is that the exclusion of traditional tales from the current selection - entailing, for example, the omission of *Beauty and the Beast* (Disney, 1991) *Mulan* (Disney, 1998) and *Anastasia* (Fox, 1998), all of which feature heroines - has unjustly weighted the findings under this heading. However there does persist in these animated films an adherence to the patriarchal story-telling tradition, described by Forgacs as 'myth(s) of patrilineal filiation without the mother' (Forgacs 1992: 373). Father-son relationships stand at the heart of the narratives of *The Lion King*, *Finding Nemo* and *Barnyard*, where mothers are marginalised, absent or dead. The devotion of the fathers and the (ultimate) respect of sons in each case is a

characteristic motif. The fathers give instruction and lay down rules, which are ignored or misunderstood, and in each case there is a lesson to be learned, either by the father or the son. At Disney, the pattern was established by *Bambi* (1942), and there are scenes in *The Lion King*, especially, which are strongly reminiscent of the Disney classic. The two 'kings' share a distinctive style of regal, authoritative walk, and a solemn gravity of speech.

The Ghibli Productions

In terms of target audience and production methods, the animated films written and directed by the Japanese artist Hayao Miyazaki and produced by Studio Ghibli between 1984 (*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*) and 2004 (*Howl's Moving Castle*), indisputably belong to the same genre as the 'western' films and their domestic commercial success matches or exceeds that of their western counterparts. *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) was targeted primarily at a younger audience, but even here elements of narrative and characterisation are sophisticated. According to McCarthy, the film 'is accessible to even the youngest child, yet it respects the intelligence of the most literate and cultivated adult' (McCarthy, 1999: 138).

The Ghibli scenarios avoid the device of zoomorphic characters. The cast is composed of human beings, and where animals are involved, they behave as animals, speechless and four-legged. There are monsters, ghosts and magical beings of many types, but these are not depicted as either comical or extra-terrestrial, having nothing in common with the monsters of *Monsters Inc.* or *Shrek.* The Ghibli monsters seem mostly to derive from some terrifying past, and the magical beings are notable for an air of subtlety and, often, sympathy. There are spirits of trees (*My Neighbour Totoro*), spirit-animals (*Princess Mononoke*) and entities possessed of metaphysical powers, all common in Japanese folklore (Kato 1989: 305). In Miyazaki's films, these powers are generally employed to protect nature, and children, from evil or destructive forces. Their nearest counterparts in the west are perhaps to be found among the spirits and divinities of European mythology such as hamadryads, horned-gods and imps.

Magical beings and magical happenings (fairies, giants, spells, the three wishes) were a staple of medieval folk stories and also of Russian wondertales, and we have seen that 'the gift of the magical agent' was one of Propp's thirty-one narrative 'functions'. *Cinderella* had its magic wand, *Snow White* its speaking mirror, *Beauty and the Beast* its magic rose and witch's curse, *Rumpelstiltskin* its straw spun into gold; but there is no such motif in the 'western' animated films based on original stories. It might be argued that no further magic is required than that which causes animals to talk in human tongues, children's toys come to life and farmyard animals to get up on their

hind legs when humans aren't present, but the specific intervention of magical agents is, as Propp realised, a different kind of narrative device to that of a creation of an unreal and patently fictive world - an element that is basic to all the films under consideration. In contrast to the 'western' examples, the narrative in the majority of Miyazaki's films is to a great extent driven by the magical dimension: Sheeta's pendant in *Laputa Castle in the Sky*, which saves her life and ultimately directs her to the floating island of her ancestors; the metaphysical powers of Howl and his flying home; the sorcery of Yubaba in *Spirited Away*; the array of magicians and entities in *Princess Mononoke*, the narrative of which culminates in the restoration of the forest-god.

The central character in most of the Ghibli films is a girl, although in most cases she is accompanied and helped by a boy or young man, as in *Princess Mononoke*, *Laputa Castle in the Sky*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Spirited Away*. In the last two of these, it is the male character who is possessed of magic powers and thus of a certain authority, whereas Nausicaa and Princess Mononoke are powerful heroines in their own right. Despite Miyazaki's admission that he was influenced in the making of the stories by the wish to recreate the rescue of heroines by heroes of the kind that were familiar to him from his boyhood reading (McCarthy 1999: 39), the overall impression of the films is one of gender equity, with female characters enjoying more of the limelight, as heroines, adventurers and, in *Spirited Away and Howl*, as villains, while male characters, such as Pazu in *Laputa Castle in the Sky* or Haku in *Spirited Away*, are given their own attributes of resourcefulness and loyalty.

There is no emphasis on the importance of family in the Ghibli films except in *My Neighbour Totoro*, where the illness of the mother and the kindness of the father are central to the narrative and where the story's resolution implies (but does not dwell upon) a reunited family. In the other films, parents are absent, peripheral or weak. In *Laputa Castle in the Sky*, Sheeta and Pazu are both orphans. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro's parents indulge their greed for good food and are transformed into pigs. Nor is the formation of a family-type group a characteristic element of the Ghibli narratives. There is, however, in each film a 'moral' lesson, more or less identical in each case, which can be summarised as follows: a state of war exists between the destructive, polluting forces of so-called progress and those who believe in a more sensitive, humanistic approach; in this war, the courage and idealism of children is an important weapon. *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* constitutes perhaps the fullest and clearest articulation of this lesson, in which a small rural community battles against a jungle turned 'toxic' by the excesses of man and against the depredations of aggressive military societies. Nausicaa herself is depicted a model of bravery and ingenuity. In *Princess Mononoke*, the spirits of nature rebel against the gradual destruction of their environment; in *Spirited Away*, the

ultimate 'enemy' is the greed of a dehumanised humanity; *in My Neighbour Totoro*, Big Totoro is a huge, lovable forest spirit who befriends the two young sisters disturbed by the illness of their mother; in *Howl* and *Laputa Castle in the Sky*, the evil is represented by warlike powers equipped with frightening destructive force and the good by two children trying to find a lost land of peace and equilibrium. Miyazaki has said that he could not conceive of writing a tale that was not based on an ecological theme, indicating the notorious mercury pollution of Minamata Bay in Japan in 1985 as a crucial influence (Miyazaki 1997: 32). The Disney films, by contrast, contain only vague sentiments of harmony between animals, which in any case represent types of human beings, as we have seen.

In terms of characterization, the Ghibli films are remarkable for the absence of stereotypes such as reluctant heroes, comic acolytes, cowardly 'lions', as well as of conventional relationships - the buddies, the doting parents, the problematic father-son tensions. Among the villains, powerful old ladies are often to be found, including Yubaba in *Spirited Away*, the pirate leader in *Laputa Castle in the Sky* and 'the witch of the waste' in *Howl's Moving Castle*. Yet even in this aspect - unusual in itself - there is a quality of elusiveness. The female pirate leader, fearsome in the early scenes, emerges as an ally in the struggle against the militarists, and even the ugly sorceress, Yubaba, reveals her sympathetic aspect. There is a clear contrast with the depiction of villainy by Disney, which is generally represented by a gang or tribe of aggressive animals - coyotes, tigers, wolves - who threaten the community. With certain exceptions (Scar in *The Lion King*) the characters and motives of the Disney villains remain undifferentiated: the leader is no more than the fiercest of the gang and the villains' motive is simply power, or prey. In the Ghibli films the presence of several distinct bands or cliques, with separate aims, allows for a complexity of plot and the representation of the different gradations and motivations of villainy. One example may suffice to illustrate this point. In *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, there is the 'home' community - traditional, agrarian, peaceful, ecological. The enemy is warlike, totalitarian, dishonourable. In between is a third state, whose leaders are attracted by the promise of aggrandisement through alliance with the oppressor but whose citizens instinctively side with the oppressed. The boy-hero who aids Nausicaa is a member of this third country, where his father is one of the leaders. Here alone in the Miyazaki opus is an example of father-son tension. It is not a familial issue but an ideological one.

Tabulation of the Findings

Table 1 presents a tabulation of the findings under ten headings, most them self-explanatory. 'Binary Opposition' alludes to the generic tendency discussed above: the location of the characters on either side of a single moral

or ethical divide - the allies on the one hand, the enemy on the other. 'Gender Bias' is deemed to exist when the narrative revolves entirely or mostly around the actions of male characters. Under all the headings, a positive sign has only been allocated to a given box when the presence of the element concerned is unmistakable.

The 'degree of conventionality' in the final column cannot by its nature be taken as definitive, but certain conclusions can be drawn. The average 'rating' of the Ghibli productions on a scale of 0-10 (where 0 represents an absence of conventional narrative elements) is 2.4 whereas that of the western films is 7.6, in emphatic support of the distinctions detailed above, with eight out of the twelve western productions scoring 8, 9 or 10. It also emerges, however, that there are films within the 'western' selection conforming to a very limited degree to the generic patterns, namely *Hoodwinked*, *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.*, with scores of three to five. *Hoodwinked* is notable for the originality of its narrative structure and characterisation; *Shrek* is essentially a parody, which deliberately inverts many of the conventional patterns and motifs; *Monsters Inc.* also has monsters for heroes and an unusually inventive plot. Even though the resolution of the stories in *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.* involve marriage or the reuniting of a family, these three films evidently constitute efforts to work beyond the parameters of genre.

Ice Age (with a score of 10) emerges as the most 'complete' example of the genre according to the selected criteria. An initial idyll is disturbed by the coming of the ice, and an exodus follows during which a smaller group splits off. Their task is to rescue and return a lost child to a tribe of Eskimos and to do this they must defeat a band of sabre-toothed tigers bent on seizing the child. The group is a threesome, two of them essentially 'orphans' or outcasts (in that they have lost their tribe) and the third one a cowardly tiger planning treachery. By the end of the film, a family is reunited (when the lost child is restored to her father), Diego the tiger is redeemed by an act of courage and the solidarity of the group is achieved. *The Lion King* and Finding Nemo, each with a score of 9, also emerge as conventional to a high degree. The conspicuous success of the three films at the box-office underlines the commercial rationale for the adherence to the repetitive narrative patterns and familiar situations.

At the other end of the scale, in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, 'Leaving Home' was the only conventional element present. Although the young girl's parental home provides the setting for the first scene, the girl does not return home after her 'triumph' (which is not a combat but the rescue of a friend). There is no violent conflict, no initial idyll or misfortune and no 'group'. The heroine does have a cat as a companion, but it is significant that when the film was dubbed for the American market, the animal became what amounted to a different character with a vocal style given 'a heavy touch of rasping sarcasm' (Pym 2007:

612), an attribute not present in the original and one which created a recognisably 'American' associate, similar to the donkey in *Shrek* or the elk in *Open Season. Ice Age* and *Kiki's Delivery Service* thus constitute the two poles of the generic spectrum. They share production techniques (the art of 'cel animation') but in terms of narrative, characterisation and iconography, they have nothing in common.

Narrative Closure and Ideology

The final point of comparison between the two groups of films is that of narrative closure, which we have identified in the western examples as being individual redemption and/or the restoration of the 'family' group. In the Ghibli productions, the resolution of the story is simultaneously more traditional and more 'ambitious' - the victory of good over evil, at least in a given chapter of the unending struggle. This teleological aspect may be found surprising in an age of relativism and postmodernism, an age of 'local, partial, provisional narratives, aware of their own fragility' (Tredell, 2002: 205). A sense of good and evil is present in the 'western' stories, but there is no sense of absolutes. What is at stake is the 'good of the community' pitted against whomever or whatever threatens it at a particular juncture. In Miyazaki's work on the other hand, it is implied that there exist certain forces in the world which must be withstood and defeated in order for a reasonable, humane and environmentally sensitive society to be maintained. A polarised representation of the issue is obviated by the recognition of degrees or gradations of both virtue and villainy.

Criticism of Disney on ideological grounds is common among scholars of children's culture. There is widespread agreement concerning Disney's 'enormous and far-reaching corporate and cultural influence' (Giroux 1998: 57), its commodification of children's culture (Forgacs 192: 362), its tendency to 'construct childhood so as to make it entirely compatible with consumerism' (Smoodin 1994: 18). Giroux refers to Disney as 'an ideological reactionary deceptively promoting a conservative worldview', one which 'produces prototypes for model schools, families, identities, communities … (but also) makes a claim on the future through its nostalgic view of the past and its construction of public memory as a metonym for the magical kingdom' (Giroux, 1998: 54-5). It may be inferred that the 'nostalgia' refers to the 'prosperous kingdom' and 'model family' of the early scenes of *The Lion King* or *Finding Nemo* (or *Jungle Book* or Bambi) while 'the claim on the future' is articulated in the restoration or affirmation of such kingdoms and such families at the end of the story. The 'construction of public memory as a metonym for the magical kingdom' accurately expresses what lies behind the creation of idylls of colourful animals at play in lush jungles, or settled kingdoms ruled by wise kings, or happy families of fish whose offspring go to school on the back of a sting-ray, and of the restoration of those idylls after a crisis has been survived.

Harvey proposes Disneyland as an embodiment of such idylls:

> A supposedly happy, harmonious and non-conflictual space set aside from the 'real' world 'outside' in such a way as to soothe and mollify, to entertain, to invent history and to cultivate a nostalgia for some mythical past (…) assembling the rest of the world, properly sanitized and mythologized, into one place of pure fantasy. (Harvey 2000: 167)

In the Ghibli productions, idylls are not characteristic and those that are depicted, as in *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* are imaginative re-creations of historical agrarian environments. There is a sense that the battle of good against evil is a serious matter, in which children have a part to play that requires them to be honest, brave and ingenious. In keeping with this essentially serious tone, there is an absence of the comic interludes which constitute an integral part of the culture of western animated films.

Implications of the Analysis

Essentially, it is argued here that the unpredictability and complexity of plot and character for which Miyazaki's work is remarkable is at least partly the result of a freedom from narrative conventions. The implication is that 'genre' acts as a restrictive influence on the creative and imaginative scope of scriptwriters and directors. The same observation has been made for the classic Hollywood genres, the Western, the Melodrama, the Gangster movie and so on (Neale 2000, 31-47). The very concept of genre implies the repetition and imitation of familiar formulae which establish, and fulfil, the expectations of audiences. As Gledhill points out: 'the economic organisation of the film industry along the lines of commodity production is cited as the reason for the existence of genres themselves' (Gledhill 1999: 141). However, animated films for children, with their dominant position in children's cinema, exercise a more powerful influence on the emotional and imaginative development of their audience than is true for films made for the adult market. If the nature of this influence is affected, and even distorted, by adherence to a limited set of incidents, characters and relationships, it is the responsibility of the film critic to highlight the fact. The problem for the filmmaker is that the maintenance of generic convention is, to a degree at least, insidious. It is not the outcome of deliberate aesthetic or intellectual choice but of a self-generating dynamic.

One aspect of contemporary animated productions that no doubt contributes to this problem is the emphatically collective nature of animation techniques and processes in western studios, with directors, art directors, scenarists, scene designers, character designers, storyboard artists and key animators collectively developing narrative and characterisation. By contrast, Miyazaki's role in the creation and production of the Ghibli films, as director, scenarist, storyboard artist and chief animator, is uniquely important. Much of

the original drawing is undertaken, and all of it personally supervised, by the director himself (McCarthy 1999: 42), and his direct influence on the finished film exceeds that of any western counterpart. His landscapes (Oriental, medieval European, Welsh mining country, mythological) bear the imprint of a rich inventiveness. His machines, from colossal airships to tiny gliders, his drilling rigs, windmills, watermills and stone crushers are the product of an imagination steeped in the history of the mechanical sciences. His stories are complex and unpredictable, and, in *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Princess Mononoke*, labyrinthine. The underlying message of his films - that the natural environment will be irreparably damaged if man's material acquisitiveness is not curbed - not only reflects some of the most acute concerns of the contemporary era but stands in direct opposition to unrestrained consumerism and the commodification of culture.

Table 1: Analysis of Film Narratives

Film		Initial Idyll	Mis-fortune	Leaving Home	Group Formed	'Binary' Opposition	Lack of Magical Agent	Combat with Villain(s)	Resolution: Reunited Family or 'marriage'	Cast of Zoomorphic Characters	Gender Bias	Degree of Generic Convention
Lion King	Disney, 1994	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	9
Toy Story	Disney, 1995	+	+	+		+	+		+		+	7
A Bug's Life	Disney, 1998	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	9
Monsters Inc.	Disney, 2001				+	+	+	+	+			5
Finding Nemo	Disney, 2003	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	9
Shrek	Dreamworks, 2001			+	+		+		+	+	+	5
Madagascar	Dreamworks, 2005	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	9
Over the Hedge	Dreamworks, 2006	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+	9
Ice Age	Fox, 2002	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	10
Hoodwinked	Kanbar, 2005						+			+	+	2
Barnyard	Nickelodeon, 2006	+	+			+	+	+	+	+	+	8
Open Season	Sony Animation, 2006	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	9
Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind	Ghibli, 1984		+	+				+				3
Laputa, Castle in the Sky	Ghibli, 1986					+	+	+				3
My Neighbour Totoro	Ghibli, 1988							+	+			2
Kiki's Delivery Service	Ghibli, 1989		+	+								1
Princess Mononoke	Ghibli, 1997		+	+				+				3
Spirited Away	Ghibli, 2001			+				+				2
Howl's Moving Castle	Ghibli, 2004			+	+			+				3

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