

**A Study on the Representation of Female Protagonists in Contemporary
Japanese Animated Film**

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This paper's primary question will be: "How are female protagonists represented in contemporary Japanese animated film?". In the following pages, Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' in cinema is used as a reference point to analyse how these characters are positioned in relation to gender. This essay surveys four contemporary Japanese animated films, *Perfect Blue*, *Spirited Away*, *Millennium Actress*, and *Your Name*, as case studies to clearly articulate the presentation of women's images in contemporary Japanese animated films. At the end of the essay, I conclude by showing a trend to critique the male gaze in the films themselves while introducing a new male gaze, what I will refer to as the paternal gaze, in coming-of-age films. This analysis also draws on contemporary analyses of Japanese media conventions in animation coming from Japanese academic.

A line of thought growing out of both critical and feminist theory is that in an era saturated with media-driven information, audiences often passively absorb and internalise views of society and their surroundings. As media such as television, film, and music continue to develop, the portrayals of certain characters in these media subtly influence the audience's understanding of their roles in the world. Feminist theorists point out that in mainstream media, positive images typically depict male groups. They are often portrayed as strong, authoritative, and high-ranking figures, traits commonly referred to as "masculine traits," which are encouraged in contrast to feminine traits. Conversely, women are depicted in opposite roles. As Wood (1994) emphasised, women in media are often in passive positions, seemingly always waiting to be rescued. Positive representations in media can empower marginalised groups (such as women and sexual minorities), helping them build self-esteem and worldviews and promote their self-reconstruction in society. In contrast, negative representations can further limit these groups, perpetuate stereotypes, and confine

their self-awareness to the representations presented in media. This supports Mulvey's conclusion that the media (film) once again presents and reproduces the male gaze (1975), which will be discussed below.

The person who first noticed and discussed the phenomenon of women being watched is John Berger (1972), who discussed women as objects of a gaze in the book *Way of Seeing*, in which he considers the relationship between art, gender, and society. In the book, Berger (1972) begins by looking at European nude paintings and analysing the image of the female character in the paintings as objectified, claiming that the category of the nude, as opposed to simply being naked, is the relationship between the nude and the viewer; the nude is called as such in virtue of it being looked at. Berger (1972) explores the motif of the mirror in art with females, denouncing the notion that mirrors are a symbol of women's vanity and argues that the mirror reinforces the dynamics of the male gaze, in which men look, and women look at themselves being gazed upon. Berger (1972) also refers to the voyeurism and scrutiny of nudes by collectors and concludes that under the male gaze, the ideal viewer is usually a man and that the ideal image of the woman is designed to please men. In Berger's work, three threads inform the selection of case studies in this essay: the objectification of women through the gaze, the use of mirrors to explore ideas of identity, and how characters are positioned to satisfy the male gaze.

In 1975, Laura Mulvey developed her concept of the "male gaze" in the essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which refers to the objectification of women from a male perspective in films and media, reducing women to mere objects of visual pleasure and satisfaction. Over time, the effects of the 'male gaze' have included the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the limited role of women in the media. In addition, scholars such as Gaye Tuchman (1978) introduce the term "symbolic annihilation" to describe the marginalisation of women in mass media. Tuchman observed that, to attract audiences, television programs in the 1950s

America had to conform to American values. In almost all programs, professional women were often condemned, while other women were seen as symbols who needed to be protected, like children. Their importance in society diminished when they were stereotyped and presented in a marginalised way. Through semiotic analysis, van Zoonen (1994) explores the male gaze and the objectification of women's bodies in advertising, arguing that feminist media in popular culture helps to dismantle the fixed meanings of gender.

Japanese Animated Films and the Study on Female Characters

Since the 1950s, animation has gone through many changes and evolutions. Over the years, these works have charmed "otaku", used to describe passionate manga and anime fans, with their unique Eastern appeal and style. Young female characters often become the highlight of these animations. Cao (2023) describes conventional Japanese animation as sharing the following features:

" The character design of young female characters gradually becomes symbolic and memorable for their large eyes, undeveloped body shapes, noticeably shorter heights, and a body proportion of around five to six heads; this depiction has become a symbol of Japanese culture. " (p. 56)

This conventional Japanese animation character appearance can be contrasted with the emphasis on the 'sensory-motor openness, elasticity, and malleability' of the subjects in later films, such as those of Miyazaki, where innocence and purity are no longer prioritised (Rifa-Valls, 2011).

Japanese scholars have studied female characters in contemporary Japanese animation in recent decades. In his book *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (2000), psychiatrist Saito Tamaki discusses the image of fighting girls in various Japanese animations

before the 1990s from multiple perspectives. In the first chapters, Tamaki (2000) starts with the works of Henry Darger and, based on the term Phallic Mother in psychoanalysis (literally meaning a mother with a phallus, which extends to mean a powerful woman), he derives the concept of the Phallic Girl. He introduces media theory and psychology theory to support his argument. Saito believed that beautiful fighting girls were merely a product unique to Japan. He analyses the differences between the fighting girls in Japanese animation and the fighting female characters in European and American films and television. The Japanese fighting girls' maintain the innocence and cute of a girl, and are inseparable from their virginity.'

In contrast, the European and American fighting female characters are 'mostly masculine in personality, muscular, with a female body and a male heart, sacrificing their femininity as the price for their strength' (Tamaki, 2000). In the following chapters, he focuses on how the audience of the fighting girls, the otaku, perceive these characters and project their desires onto them, a sentiment depicted in the case study below, *Perfect Blue*. Afterwards, Tamaki (2000) analysed and summarised the anime of the fighting girl genre from the 1960s to the 1990s and found that a 'sexual' element marked the beginnings of Japanese animation. For example, some anime included sexual innuendo in the transformation scenes of the beauty girls, whereas in major Western anime, there are few examples of intentional 'sexuality'. This conclusion proves Tamaki's view that fighting girls, as fictional beings, are unattainable and primarily serve as objects for otaku to consume and fulfil their desires.

In the book *The Ideological Sphere of Pop Culture: The Possibility or Impossibility of Connection with Literature*, Chida Hiroyuki (2013) explores the female characters in mainstream Japanese "sekai-kei" (world-type) animations, typically narratives where a pair of teenage boys and girls strive to save the world in an apocalyptic setting, generally produced from 1979 to 2011. He cautiously critiques

Saito Tamaki's concept of the Phallic Girl. Following this, this essay looks at a contemporary animated film exploring shifts away from the fighting girl into films that directly engage in looking (*Perfect Blue*) and films that explore overcoming and identity with a more paternal gaze (*Spirited Away*) rather than conforming to the fight/phallic girl trope.

Sugawa Akiko, in her essay *Children of Sailor Moon: The Evolution of Magical Girls in Japanese Anime* (2015), studies the characteristics of female protagonists in different periods of Japanese magical girl animations. According to Sugawa (2015), in magical girl anime during the feminist movement of the 1970s, the girls' charms were portrayed as expressions of their strength rather than as a means to please men. By the early 21st century, darker themes, such as death and cost, emerged in magical girl anime, and the genre's focus expanded beyond mere transformation and combat. This thematical dark turn is discussed by Kono Sintaro (2023), who, examining contemporary classic animations and TV series from Japan and the West, explores women's overlooked value and objectification in media. Notably, in Chapter 3, Sintaro analyses the labour performed by the female protagonists in Miyazaki's (who is discussed in the third case study) works on a post-Fordist and post-feminist level, pointing out that Kiki's delivery service is a kind of idolatrous labour that is self-identified as an 'effective use of women.' At the same time, Chihiro's is a mix of various kinds of unpaid physical labour. These concepts form a backdrop to the following analysis of four Japanese animation films, looking at how female characters are presented in these surreal, thriller, fantasy, and world-type Japanese animation films. The essay concludes with a summary, identifying recent trends and the impact these representations have on the audience and society.

***Perfect Blue* (1997)**

In Satoshi Kon's (1997) psychological thriller animation film *Perfect Blue*,

former second-rate idol singer Mima Kirigoe transitions into a new role as an actress. However, it is driven to the brink of mental instability by the rapidly changing environment. After a series of mysterious murders, Mima ultimately finds her "true self" and becomes a famous actress by the film's end. As an R-rated animation film, *Perfect Blue* contains multiple scenes of nudity and sexual violence. In this case study of an adult-targeted animation film, I will analyse the characters of Mima Kirigoe and her assistant Rumi from the perspectives of theories such as the male gaze and female aversion.

Throughout the film, Kon also employs stunning transitions and rich cinematographic techniques to create a visual effect that showcases Mima being scrutinised inside and outside the film. He mentioned that "looking" is one of *Perfect Blue*'s themes (2007). For example, in Mima's apartment, "Mima's Room" symbolically represents the dynamics of "being seen and observed." Through uniform elements in Mima's room, such as the fish tank, television, and computer screen, as well as the window overlooking the room, and even the underground parking lot entrance where the murder later occurs, all are framed in the 4:3 aspect ratio commonly used in the 1990s. Additionally, as an idol and actress, Mima is constantly "being looked at." This concept inherently implies objectification and being gazed upon, and Kon establishes a tendency for Mima and the entire narrative to be carefully scrutinised. Kon deconstructs the male gaze through symbolic annihilation, that is, by first objectifying Mima in the plot and the images; however, he then allows her to break out of this objectification, which, in a sense, partially deconstructs the male gaze.

At the film's beginning, during the last live performance of the idol group CHAM, Mima's stalker, Uchida, is seen working as a security guard in the audience. He crouches down and extends his hand towards Mima, performing on stage in a short pink skirt. From Uchida's perspective, Mima appears like a doll dancing in his

hand, and this angle quickly exposes her skirt. Uchida's character is presented to the audience in a very explicit manner: "The decisive male (fan) gaze projects his fantasies onto the female image that is stereotyped according to his needs (Laura, 1975)." In contrast, despite being pelted with soda cans and mocked by a group of delinquents, Mima did not seem bothered. As an idol, she endured and accepted the gaze of Uchida and other fans.

At the concert's end, Mima announces her retirement from her idol career and prepares to transition into acting. While interacting with fans, Mima learns about a blog called "Mima's Room" from one of them. With the help of her assistant Rumi, she buys a personal computer, which was still rare in the 1990s, and connects to the internet to access the blog. She discovers that her daily life is being detailed online for all internet users, and the realisation that she is being watched unsettles her. Subsequently, Mima, in her role as a new actress, plays the victim's sister, Yoko Takakura, in the TV drama *Double Bind*. However, her debut only includes three inconspicuous shots and does not receive a strong reaction from fans or other viewers. Mima's manager, Rumi, negotiates with the head of the agency and scriptwriter, Shibuya, hoping for more screen time for Mima. As a result, Shibuya writes a nightclub rape scene for Yoko, the role Mima plays. In this scene, Mima is entirely passive and receives complex and suggestive attention and gazes from all around. Before the shooting begins, the primarily male crew shows obscene anticipation, and everyone greedily watches Mima in a costume similar to but more revealing than her CHAM performance outfit. As the shooting starts, the camera moves from Mima's feet up to her thighs, then quickly rises to three different parts of her body, deliberately pausing to guide the viewer's gaze along her curves—this is a standard sexually suggestive camera movement in cinema directed through the male gaze. When the director calls for action, Mima immediately performs, displaying her attractive body and bold smile. As the scene climaxes, a dazed Mima fantasises about an idol adored by fans under the scrutiny of countless observers. Satoshi Kon

describes this moment as the symbolic death of the idol Mima and the rebirth of actress Mima. According to Kon (2007), in an interview, he felt "satisfaction" while drawing these frames. This indicates that, as a male, Kon could not wholly escape the constraints of male narratives and even enjoyed the process of depicting the female character's sexualised scenes, thus reinforcing the dual gaze of the protagonist both inside and outside the film. Concerning the explicit representation of women in sexual acts, Zoonen (1994) states that such content "should not merely be seen as a representation of sexual fantasies, or a description of nudity and sex in a potentially liberating way; it is a celebration of male control over women". However, this narrative seems to rationalise the subsequent plot twist where Mima adopts a new persona and ultimately transforms. It is implied at the end that Mima has become a famous actress, and those who gazed at and controlled Mima meet tragic ends.

After the rape scene airs, fans of the new CHAM believe that "Mima's fans must be in tears." Mima hears the term "dirty" from her hallucinated virtual self. Yet, the provocative and intense plot twist naturally attracts many new viewers, and more people begin to notice the girl who has transformed from an unknown idol group member into a risqué actress. Mima starts receiving more interviews on television variety shows, with her outfits shifting from ordinary to boldly revealing late-night variety styles. She even takes on the task of shooting a risqué photo book. Kon uses his adept montage techniques in this segment, employing the lens of a photo photographer to sequentially film Mima's transition from being fully dressed to being naked. After this series of image transformations, Kon arranges multiple scenes where Mima converses briefly with a virtual Mima (who claims to be the "real Mima") in mirrors and windows. As Berger (1972) states in *Ways of Seeing*, "To be looked at is to be on display, and every gaze is an evaluation, sometimes coming from oneself, reflecting the self in the mirror." Mima is continually gazed at and judged by the virtual Mima, for instance, when her TV drama receives a lukewarm reaction while her former group CHAM's new song charts for the first time in the top hundred. The

virtual Mima questions the choices and future of the less-known actress Mima. After Mima finishes the rape scene, the virtual Mima appears in the car window, taunting Mima with expressions and words, saying, "You have been tainted; everyone likes that idol Mima," reflecting the dual gaze Mima experiences internally—from the male gaze (fans and viewers) and her own self-gaze as a female. Later, Mima returns home, finds her pet fish dead, and breaks down in tears, expressing her frustration with her work and herself.

Mima's assistant, Rumi, is another significant female character in the film, and she is also one of the instigators behind "Mima's Room" and the murder incidents. Rumi had been an idol in her youth but did not succeed. Moreover, Rumi's appearance in the film is the opposite of Mima's—wide-set eyes, small eyes, a round face, and a large body, which is hard to associate with the idol image of the Heisei era. The stereotype of idols in the public and entertainment industry is typically naive, small, and cute young women, which fits the ideal female image in the male gaze context. Kon depicts Rumi's appearance as something not desired by the male (fan) gaze, even though it is slightly unattractive. This reflects Ueno's (2010) definition of "woman" in a patriarchal society: to be a "woman" is to be an object of male sexual desire; those who do not meet this condition cannot be called "women". When Rumi fails to become an object of attraction, she ends her idol career and becomes an assistant to CHAM. This explains why, at the beginning of the plot, she supports and protects Mima's rights and choices in the entertainment industry as if she were a guardian, projecting her own experience onto Mima. During the filming of the rape scene, Rumi silently smokes and shows her disapproval of the boss's decision to have Mima perform the rape scene through her tears. However, later in the film, Kon reveals Rumi's inner thoughts: she likes Mima very much, and when actress Mima (performing the rape scene) kills the idol Mima that Rumi admired but could not become, her feelings shift from anger (killing the photographer who took nude photos of Mima) to hatred (resulting in a split personality where she believes that she,

wearing the latest CHAM performance outfit, is the "real Mima"), leading her to desire to kill the actress Mima. This idea of desire is not just projection but memetic, where one's desire is to *be* that which one gazes at. It is made explicit in *Perfect Blue* and developed in the following case studies, specifically *Your Name*.

***Millennium Actress* (2002)**

This is the second animation film directed by Satoshi Kon, released directly after *Perfect Blue*. The film tells the story of Chiyoko Fujiwara, a famous Japanese actress who embarks on a quest to fulfil a promise she made to a revolutionary activist and painter during World War II. In this film, Chiyoko, the protagonist based on the Japanese actress Setsuko Hara, is clearly the central female character carefully portrayed by Satoshi Kon. Similar to Satoshi Kon's previous film, *Perfect Blue*, Chiyoko's physical appearance is portrayed in a style closer to realism, not with the characteristic large eyes and head with thin body described by Cao (2023).

Born in a candy shop after the Great Kanto Earthquake, Chiyoko Fujiwara had a typical teenage year, and even the scouts came to her to ask her to be an actress in a film. Before long, however, she does rescue her first love, a civil rights activist and painter, from a police chase. The painter gives Chiyo the key to 'the most important thing' and agrees to give it to her when they reunite after the war. However, the artist was eventually discovered by the police and fled to Manchukuo, leaving Chiyoko with a belated farewell. Afterwards, to search for the painter, Chiyoko resolutely accepts an offer from the boss of Ginei to go to Manchukuo to shoot a film. From then on, Chiyoko's life as an actress searching for the pair began. In the second film she appeared in, the spinning wheel crone makes her drink a thousand years of life tea, cursing Chiyoko with immortality, saying to her, 'I love you like a madman, and I hate you with all my heart.' In subsequent episodes, viewers will realise that the crone and Chiyoko are the same person. Carrying this curse of love and hate, Chiyoko runs for a

thousand years on screen in seven different roles in pursuit of the painter.

In *Millennium Actress*, Chiyoko takes control of her destiny and exhibits the persistence usually associated with masculine qualities, a character design and narrative that seems to break the male gaze. In contrast to Chiyoko's notable presence, Imamu gives little attention to male characters (Gao, 2010). The presence of these characters is indirect and subtle, from the painter Chiyoko pursues to the small company director Tachibana and her husband Jinpachi Nezu, who made Chiyoko's documentary the film. In the film, everything is told from Chiyoko's point of view, and the painter she is after is never named by herself or the audience from the moment he appears to the end of the film, and Imamu does not even have a close-up of his appearance; Tachibana, as the director of the documentary, can only follow Chiyoko's footsteps to keep up with her narrative from beginning to end, and he is often seen in an exaggerated and comical performance. Nezu, on the other hand, is a typical male from a patriarchal perspective, and his plot underlines Chiyoko's persistence in pursuing the painter. Throughout the film, Chiyoko presents an image of bravery, energy, and resilience, sticking to her beliefs despite the setbacks and lack of understanding from others in her search for the painter. 'Maybe he will see my films.' In the film's early stages, Chiyoko made the film that made her famous with this thought in mind. Later in the film, Chiyoko realises that the painter may have passed away with Tachibana's explanation, but her faith and pursuit never wavered until the key disappeared for the last time. Throughout the film, the painter's image appears only as a shadow on the screen, but in Chiyoko's mind, the painter does not only exist as the object of Chiyoko's crush, However, her faith and pursuit never wavered until the key disappeared for the last time. Chiyoko's dying words further highlight the female consciousness that runs through the film, breaking free from the male domination: 'After all, what I love is the pursuit of him'.

Spirited Away (2001)

Spirited Away is Hayao Miyazaki's first work of the 21st century and marks a shift in how he treats his characters. In this film, we see the paternal gaze of Miyazaki; LaMarre (2006) describes the subjects of the paternal gaze as "Miyazaki's children or tweens", which "are not so much about purity or innocence as about a sensory-motor openness, elasticity, and malleability" (LaMarre, as cited in Rifa-Valls, 2011). However, *Spirited Away* marks a shift in how he depicts female characters, though it should be noted that young women maturing is a constant theme in Miyazaki's filmography. The film tells the story of a girl named Chihiro Ogino who faces numerous challenges after becoming lost in a strange world. With courage and the help of others, she works in a bathhouse and, in the process of saving her parents and friends, learns about friendship and love. *Spirited Away* is a fantasy coming-of-age film where Miyazaki depicts Chihiro Ogino's growth trajectory, from her dependency on her parents before they are mysteriously transformed into pigs to her vulnerability when she first enters the spirit world bathhouse, and then finally, her ability to stand on her own and save loved ones after facing difficulties.

Unlike the following case study, in the film, there is no traditional tall, capable male character to rescue Chihiro from the predicament in the spirit world. Instead, an androgynous boy, Haku, helps Chihiro (Rifa-Valls, 2011). Haku first meets Chihiro at the bathhouse bridge at dusk and then directly points out the way for Chihiro to return to the real world. Later, he helps her as a friend when Chihiro's body becomes transparent. However, as the story progresses, Haku does not remain Chihiro's protector. In the film's latter half, he receives help from the mentally mature Chihiro. Here, Miyazaki attempts to reflect on the transitional period for girls entering puberty in real life, as Miyazaki sets many obstacles for Chihiro's growth from the male perspective of the paternal gaze. Miyazaki mentioned in an interview;

"Every time I conceive Chihiro's character and actions, I ask myself if my

friend's daughter or her little friends could do this as well... because I want this girl to become capable by overcoming numerous challenges." (Miyazaki, as cited in Mes, 2013)

Moreover, Chihiro's appearance is unlike the typical "little girl" attire of female protagonists in Miyazaki's previous films: she has a ponytail. She wears a short-sleeve T-shirt and shorts, changing from the skirt attire of previous female leads, such as *Kiki's Delivery Service*. This shift makes her visually ambiguous, allowing more focus on how she overcomes obstacles, sheds ignorance and immaturity, and ultimately grows into a courageous person who can face the world.

After Haku helps Chihiro evade a search for 'non-spirits', he directs her to the boiler room to ask the boiler man for a job—Miyazaki's view is evident at this point: without work, one cannot survive in this strange world, even Chihiro who is just a girl who has not yet started middle school. In such a plot setting, Miyazaki's perspective can be seen as having a paternal instructional meaning : The male gaze as a paternal gaze is not intended to objectify the young girl but rather to guide or instruct her (Westcott, 2020). Through *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki provides life advice to girls born during the late bubble economy, suggesting that one must earn a place in society through one's labour. In Sintaro's book *Fighting Princess, Working Girl* (2023), he introduces the analysis of the labour nature and value of women in Japanese animation through Fordism and post-Fordist labour in Chapter 3. Sintaro points out that in *Spirited Away*, one major characteristic of the bathhouse's labour system is turning all labour into hired labour, apart from the aspect of 'giving work rather than welfare'. Based on Hayao Miyazaki's concept of labour as shown in the bathhouse scene, Sintaro (2023), in an interview with Miyazaki, identifies this type of labour as a combination of dependent labour, sexual labour, love labour (the most common form being marriage, where women are deprived of their names), and household chores (pp. 89-93). Furthermore, compared to other works by Hayao Miyazaki, such

as *Kiki's Delivery Service*, which has been described as a "textbook of post-feminism",

"Kiki's labour, her signature smile, and the scene where she is broadcasted on television at the climax of the story and idolised demonstrates a form of identity labour and gendered emotional labour that is in opposition to what is portrayed in *Spirited Away*." (Sintaro, 2023, p. 81-87)

This shift that Sintaro (2023) identifies is a shift from recognition to overcoming as a measure of success; that is to say, it is the shift from a male gaze to its paternal variant.

The bathhouse resembles a modern Japanese company with strict hierarchies and has a prominent female antagonist: Yubaba. Yubaba is almost the female counterpart to Chihiro: an adult, a mother, and the ruler of the bathhouse world. In traditional patriarchal narratives, having a female character as an antagonist is also significant. The contrast between the weird appearance of Yubaba and the petite figure of Chihiro leaves a deep impression: dressed in a blue Western-style dress, with a beak-like nose under white, styled hair, a large head with exaggerated head-to-body proportions, an older woman's wrinkled face, and well-manicured hands with rings and nails, using magic to pull Chihiro into her office and creating a mess while dealing with her son Boh. It is easy for the audience to see that she is a very typical witch character. According to her attire and the decoration of her office, Yubaba can be seen as a very stingy yet extravagant capitalist, the biggest obstacle Chihiro encounters in the spirit world in her quest to survive and save her parents. When Chihiro overcomes various obstacles to reach the top floor of the bathhouse for the interview, Yubaba makes things difficult for Chihiro before she even appears: the door knocker resembling Yubaba scolds Chihiro for not knocking before entering, saying, "Aren't you even going to knock? You're the most pathetic little girl I've ever seen." However, Yubaba

still uses magic to pull Chihiro into her office. Yubaba takes Chihiro's name through a contract, and Chihiro can only be called "Sen" afterwards. She then threatens Chihiro with becoming coal or suffering the same fate as her parents, who turned into pigs for eating the food of the gods. However, when Yubaba's son Boh cries and throws a tantrum, Yubaba shifts from being a "bad woman" back to a traditional mother who dotes on her son. From this, it is clear that Yubaba is not entirely an evil antagonist; besides her domineering side, she also has weaknesses, making her a complex character. Later in the plot, it becomes apparent that Yubaba's love for Boh is not a typical mother-son relationship but a pathological one. When Boh kicks Yubaba in the face while crying, Yubaba does not get angry but instead calmly soothes him. When Zeniba (Yubaba's identical sister) swaps Boh, Yubaba seems completely unaware.

Furthermore, Yubaba's role is also crucial in the scenes where Chihiro begins to grow and become independent in the bathhouse when Chihiro goes to the swamp to return the stolen seal from Zeniba, which was taken under Yubaba's orders. While Zeniba looks and dresses like Yubaba, their personalities differ, and Zeniba lives in a secluded rural cottage. According to Papastavros (2021), if Yubaba and Zeniba are seen as two sides of the same person, this opposition highlights the complex and contradictory psychology of modern Japanese mothers who dislike both work and raising children.

When Miyazaki represents his young female protagonists, he adopts a paternal gaze, distinct from the sexually suggestive male gaze in *Perfect Blue*. This paternal gaze is evident in *Spirited Away*, from Chihiro's appearance to the bathhouse's "no work, no survival" setting and her subsequent roles in caring for Haku, the Baby Boh, and No-Face. It is clear that from Miyazaki's perspective, his ideal young girl should become a female who takes on various roles in her labour, even in precarious times, and is expected to act as a caretaker (or mother) at times. In contrast, reflecting on Yubaba's storyline and conclusion, as discussed by McCarthy (2018) and cited by

Papastavros (2021), the way Miyazaki presents women is not generally supportive. The life choices of older women, unlike his young female protagonists, do not appear to be portrayed as hopeful or presenting positive role models.

Your Name (2016)

Your Name (2016), which was produced over a decade after *Spirited Away*, became the highest-grossing film in Japan for its release year. This "Sekai-kei" surrealist anime shows continued emphasis on overcoming rather than the exploration of the concept of external recognition, as emphasised in Kon's films. Makoto Shinkai (2016) directed the film *Your Name*, which tells the story of Miyamizu Mitsuha, a high school girl living in a remote town, Itomori. Tachibana Taki, a high school boy living in Tokyo, changes souls and enters each other's lives due to divine power as a once-in-a-thousand-year comet is about to arrive. However, in this film, the body-swapping, outside of being a core plot device, functions as a mechanism for analysis, allowing the viewer to notice many differences in the treatment of males and females in Japanese society and culture. Through a feminist lens, this film reveals many contemporary conventions associated with the male gaze and male and female sexuality in contemporary Japanese animation.

In the opening three minutes or so of the film, the male protagonist, Taki, wakes up in a dream and realises that his consciousness is not in his own body; instead, he is in a high school girl's body. He looks around from his confusion and naturally looks down at his neck. Makoto Shinkai shows the girl's breasts in a very candid overhead close-up; such lewd shots are characteristic of Japanese animation; following this, 'Mitsuha' begins to fondle the breasts of the body that does not belong to him to confirm whether it is a dream or reality, with confusion and curiosity. If the above is viewed as a harmless opening sequence that will make the audience laugh, then the fact that it only appears once in the film is enough. However, throughout the film, we

see multiple scenes that seem to cater explicitly to the male gaze; in addition to Taki rubbing Mitsuha's breasts three times, director Makoto Shinkai also included other shots: when Taki and Mitsuha swap bodies to play basketball, the camera gives them close-ups of their breasts jiggling; in the second half of the movie, when Oji-senpai's skirt is torn, the director includes a shot that resembles peeking under her skirt, *Your Name*, therefore, presents us with an interesting example of Japanese media that both continue to critique notions of gender, while still conforming to male gaze driven convention. It seems significant that if director Makoto Shinkai were to remove these scenes directly, it would not have much impact on the plot and expression of this film. When male viewers see these scenes, most of them will enjoy the 'perks' in it because it satisfies their voyeuristic fetish through the male gaze. As Mauley (1975) states, "When the viewer identifies with the protagonist, he projects himself onto his own kind, his own screen substitute", whereas female viewers may have become accustomed to women's bodies being displayed in this way, following Mulvey, Schipper (2018) points out, 'Men look at women. Women look at how they are looked at.'

In the subsequent plot, the pair continue to swap bodies, trying to live each other's lives with a degree of difficulty. The film shows that Taki, who is in Mitsuha's body, as a male, does things that do not conform to the societal expectations of female identity in an unfamiliar environment: arriving at the school with messy hair, not in Mitsuha's typical braided style, speaking in a masculine sitting down in a skirt without realising that her legs should be folded together. From the above plots, we can see what McCracken (2007) identifies: with the appearance of cinema and television, more and more rules of femininity are being disseminated through standardised visual images that form a culture; in your name, the arbitrariness of these things is thrown into sharp relief. McCracken (2007) says of contemporary film and television:

"We no longer see written descriptions or role models of what it means to be a woman or what femininity consists of, but we learn about these rules directly through body discourse: A wide variety of images that tell us about the clothing styles, body shapes, facial expressions, gestures, and behaviours a woman should have." (p. 247).

From this, we can see that through the plot, there is a dismantling of gender norms unfolding while the male gaze is reproduced through the above-mentioned 'borderline' shots.

As the story develops, Mitsuha seems to loathe her own identity: a high school girl who is the daughter of the local mayor, raised by her grandmother, and has lived since birth in a remote mountain town far from Tokyo. She often comments, "In her next life, please let her be a good-looking man in Tokyo". The next day, she starts her life as a handsome Tokyo boy: she swaps bodies with Taki and begins her day as a male high school student in Tokyo. Her first day of experiencing life as a member of the opposite sex is just as bad as Taki's.

After the first body swap, Mitsuha and Taki realise that they swap bodies weekly for unknown and mysterious reasons and gradually become familiar with each other's lives. They set rules so as not to ruin each other's lives. Mitsuha asks Taki not to touch her body or let any other man touch her body, while Taki forbids Mitsuha from presenting femininely.

Throughout the film's middle section, despite the rule, they both make transgressions, sometimes for the good of the other person. For example, Taki, in Mitsuha's body, confronts her bullies, and Mitsuha helps Taki in his relationships. However, how are these traits not stereotypes? As Wood (1994) summarises, Often, males are portrayed as active, adventurous, assertive, sexually aggressive, and largely uninvolved in relationships. While reinforcing this sentiment, the film does seem to

offer a critique, making the implication that over-conforming to stereotypes negatively affects both characters, whose lives seem to improve through the body swap.

In the film's final act, Mitsuha develops a crush on Taki but finds out not only have they been swapping places but also times and Taki is living three years in the future. After attempting to connect with an unknowing past Taki, she returns home and cuts her hair; this symbolic act coincides with the end of the body swapping. On that day, a once-in-a-millennium comet appeared, splitting into two, with one shard crashing into the town, killing its residents. Taki, no longer swapping bodies, and his memories of his other life fading, comes to the town to find that three years ago, it was destroyed. One last time, Taki travelled back to Mitsuha's body from three years ago by drinking half of Mitsuha's rice liquor (fermented with her saliva) and preparing to save the town by evacuating the residents and was able to reverse the past and save the entire town. An interesting parallel with the earlier case study, *Perfect Blue*, is this memetic desire to become someone else, and there is also a shared idea with *Spirited Away* in which one grapples with forgetting their identity as they go through a process of maturation.

Summary of case studies, positioning of women

The above case studies represent a survey of prominent contemporary Japanese animated films that reflect the contemporary positioning of women in Japanese media. These films show us two different treatments, two in the context of coming-of-age narratives in which identity is explored, and the other two works, both by Kon, directly interrogate the positioning of women in relation to the gaze. *Spirited Away* and *Your Name* reach a far wider audience of all ages, and thus, for the most part, they do not have the same sexualised male gaze present in *Perfect Blue*; they do not present us with an example of the phallic-gaze phallic-girl combination, but rather the

contemporary development from the "fighting girl" shown in Miyazaki's paternal gaze. Instead of the male gaze, as defined by Mauvely and Berger, an objectifying gaze, the gaze has become the paternal gaze, which is more instructive. Chihiro, who starts as a spoiled and childish girl, overcomes numerous obstacles in the bathhouse and grows into a mature adolescent. This is precisely how Miyazaki wanted to present his perspective of a hopeful girl after the bubble economy era. In *Your Name*, Mitsuha is presented as a very ordinary girl, but the director objectifies her body and exposes it on the screen, adding some unnecessary borderline scenes that cater to a more orthodox conception of the male gaze. Despite these moments, the body-swapping between Mitsuha and Taki makes it easy for the audience to see the different expectations of masculinity and femininity in Japanese society and even the world; these unnecessary, borderline scenes can be read as self-aware in a way the earlier Japanese animated film could not.

From a character design perspective, with the exclusion of *Spirited Away*, the other three female protagonists are in their teenage years and share a similar slender physique, a typical depiction of a young female in Japanese animation. However, over time, the appearance of female characters in Japanese animation has become less diverse compared to twenty years ago. Through the development of the representation of women in Japanese animated films, we can see that there has been a shift in how female characters are treated in the narratives of these media, but it is not as evident in their appearance. In Satoshi Kon's two films, Mima and Chiyoko have faces that align more closely with realistic human proportions. In *Your Name*, Mitsuha looks considerably younger than Chiyoko, who is the same age, with oversized eyes dominating much of her face, a rounded face, and a slender body. This increasing infantilisation of female characters in Japanese animation can be traced back to Japan's bubble economy collapse in the 1990s. The solidification of class in Japanese society has increased the contraction of people's desires, and audiences have grown tired of grandiose narrative themes and have begun to focus on the stories of ordinary

people instead. The trend in characterisation has also shifted from the slender, tough-looking protagonists of sci-fi anime to cuter, younger characters in stories about the relaxed daily lives of ordinary people. (Cao, 2023).

Conclusion

The four films discussed, *Perfect Blue*, *Millennium Actress*, *Spirited Away*, and *Your Name*, span a two-decade period where we see some shift in the representation of female characters in contemporary Japanese animated film: the former three are works from the late 20th century to the early 2000s. In contrast, *Your Name* was released in 2016. Although all three directors are male, their male perspectives in narration and intent differ; through concepts of the male gaze and the paternal gaze, we can better understand these differences. Despite the difference, we can still observe some similar traits and representations in these female protagonists and supporting female characters, which conform to the conventions of Japanese animation.

In *Perfect Blue*, the pervasive theme of "looking" and the explicit sexual content of the film led me to apply concepts such as the male gaze, voyeurism, and female self-loathing in the analysis. The film traces Mima's transformation and self-growth through being scrutinised by her idol group fans and later engaging in self-examination through the mirror. While the explicit scenes serve to satisfy the audience's voyeuristic pleasure, corroborated by Mulvey's (1975) theory that film provides scopophilia. They also play a role in setting up the subsequent plot. However, their existence is not entirely justified. The character of Rumi, a supporting female role, is also portrayed with depth. Her early failed career as an idol and her incongruous appearance with being observed create a strong contrast with Mima. Additionally, Rumi's jealousy and attempts to kill Mima in the latter part of the film push the concept of female self-loathing to its extreme.

In contrast, Satoshi Kon's second animated film, *Millennium Actress*, released five years later, features Chiyoko Fujiwara, who, like Mima, is also an actress but lacks the narrative of being gazed upon. Chiyoko's poised and determined pursuit of her ideals grants her agency and completely disrupts the passive and objectified narrative typically assigned to female characters. Like Rumi in *Perfect Blue*, actress Yoko Shimao, who frequently performs opposite Chiyoko, presents an image opposite Chiyoko. Kon's shift in how he depicts females reflects a trend in Japanese animated films, while the appearance of female characters remains traditional, revealing a more complex and varied core in the narrative.

The representation of female characters in these four Japanese animation films appears in different ways: narrative and visual. In visual, some films still retain elements of the male gaze, paternal gaze, or stereotypes. This often appears through character design, image, and camera movements, contributing to the objectification and gaze toward female characters, while the narrative often focuses on stereotypes or traditional gender roles, which can be seen as either critiquing or further deepening gender stereotypes. These representations may influence young people, especially adolescent girls, in their self-development, as proposed by Mulvey (1975).

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