Food, Humans and Other Kinds of Matter

A Posthumanist Materialist Reading of the Anime Film

*Spirited Away*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................................3
   DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE..................................................................................................................3
   MY ENTRY POINTS ..........................................................................................................................6

II. ANALYSIS.................................................................................................................................................12
   Agency and Magic.............................................................................................................................12
   Eat or/and Be Eaten? .........................................................................................................................16
   Who Is Actually Eating Whom? .........................................................................................................20
   The Dangers of Transgression ............................................................................................................22
   Problematic Incarnations ...................................................................................................................24
   Who Is the Monster Anyway? ............................................................................................................27

III. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION....................................................................................................................30

REFERENCES.............................................................................................................................................32
I. INTRODUCTION

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE...

Watching a film that really moves you, it is easy to forget your own life and find yourself absorbed by the world revealed before you on the screen. You may, at least for a moment, wish that the world you inhabit were more like the fictional universe you get a peek into. When I watched the animated film *Spirited Away* (2001)\(^1\) for the first time some ten years ago I was seduced by the imaginative and unpredictable plot, the beautiful animations and all the weird characters that appear. Indeed, you could say I was spirited away for the two hours’ duration of the film. Or, to use a metaphor borrowed from Lewis Carroll’s famous novel – I fell into the rabbit hole and ended up in Wonderland. This is the place where your habitual thoughts are not particularly helpful and you have to re-think your knowledge and your strategies in order to come out safe and sound on the other side. This describes my adventure into the confusing world of *Spirited Away*; first in the experience of watching the film for the first time and then, more recently, in the work of analysing it for this thesis.

The Wonderland metaphor could also describe the adventure of the young female protagonist by the name of Chihiro.\(^2\) She travels by car with her parents to their new home. Chihiro is sulking in the backseat, not happy about moving and having to leave her friends behind. They get lost while attempting a shortcut and suddenly the dirt road ends in front of a narrow tunnel, built in traditional Japanese style. Chihiro wants to continue the journey, but the parents insist on having a look on the other side of the tunnel and so they walk through it. Passing through the gate Chihiro anxiously remarks that the building is “moaning”\(^3\) and as the spectator is about to find out, the magical world they enter is indeed a world where every piece of matter may come alive. Her parents are transformed into pigs early

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\(^1\) The original Japanese title is *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*.  
\(^2\) *Spirited Away* has intertextual connections to *Alice in Wonderland* as well as to other Western narratives, according to Susan J. Napier. "Matter out of Place: Carnival, Containment, and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki’s ‘Spirited Away’”. *Journal of Japanese Studies* 32, no 2 (2006): 290.  
\(^3\) The references and quotations from the film that I include in my discussions are based on the English-spoken version of the film, which sometimes differ substantially from the English subtitles.
in the film, which leaves Chihiro alone to fend for herself in this spirit-realm where no humans are allowed. In order to rescue her parents and return to her world, she has to face some rather daunting challenges. She takes up a position as a bath attendant in the bathhouse for gods that is located in the realm. The staff consists of a diversity of beings; some with animal appearances and others with humanoid bodies. The bathhouse is ruled by the sorceress Yubaba, who magically steals Chihiro’s name which prevents her from leaving the realm. Starting at the bottom of the workplace hierarchy, Chihiro has to do the dirty work such as cleaning the Stink God that nobody else wants to touch. However, she quickly makes some friends who help her through the ordeals. In the end Chihiro manages to rescue her friend Haku from dying, and the parents from being eaten, and she returns with her parents to their human world.

I am far from being alone in admiring this film; it was a huge economic success in Japan and it has also reached a wide audience outside of its country of origin. Although primarily targeting a very young audience, the film clearly appeals to adults as well. Made by the Japanese writer/director Hayao Miyazaki (1941-), it won an Oscar for best animated feature and it has been of interest to academic research in fields ranging from studies of Japanese history and cultural identity⁴, to ecological economics⁵.

The otherworld presented in the film is a world brimming with non-human presence and agency - and where the humans are the Others. As such it presents an interesting case to study from a posthumanist point of view. The numerous transformations and exchanges between different kinds of bodies (humans, animals and other kinds of matter such as food), also provide ample material for materialist readings.

Since the first time I watched the film, I have seen it several times and each time I notice different details and aspects that interest me. Generally speaking, what intrigues me the most in the world of fiction is its ability to show alternatives to the life we humans are living (on individual as well as collective levels) and to mirror the world we know but from new, unexplored angles. Fiction has the power to distort the familiar until no longer recognisable.

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Thus, fictitious worlds may show the contingency of the conditions, i.e. how things could be
different. The world described in Spirited Away appears in many ways as radically different
from our own world – it is full of magic and inhabited by animals, gods and other creatures in
a kind of inter-species co-habitation. At the same time the conditions in which the bathhouse
workers live and toil are not so strange and unfamiliar to a human spectator such as myself. It
is far from a utopia where beings co-exist peacefully, quite the contrary. The bathhouse (the
part of the realm located outside of the bathhouse is mostly unknown to the spectator) is full
of conflictual relationships and power hierarchies that in many ways are similar to those of
the world I inhabit. Evidently, seeing as Spirited Away is the result of an idea originating in
Miyazaki’s human mind and realised together with a team of human contributors⁶, it is not
strange that it has similarities to our world. Apart from the power relationships that bear
resemblance to the human world, there are a lot of instances where clearly anthropomorphic
traits are given to the non-human characters in the film. Even the animals working in the
bathhouse wear clothes and in one scene you see one of the kitchen workers smoke a cigarette
for example.

My overall aim with this analysis is to explore ways of eschewing anthropocentrism and
to examine the importance of matter, especially its agency in social structures and boundary
making. Throughout the analysis I will give attention to the various entanglements at play, for
example between language and materiality, Self and Other, human and non-human. For this
purpose, I will focus on a few interconnected themes in Spirited Away. I will look at the
importance of food and eating in the film, understood as an exchange between animate and
inanimate matter. Putting on the posthumanist glasses allows me to discern the agency
associated with inanimate matter and regard the eating in terms of exchanges between
different kinds of matter, rather than proposing that the eating body simply absorbs the
extra-corporeal matter into its autonomous entity. Thus, I will also problematise the
humanist notion of agency as an inherent capacity and propose more relational perspectives.
I shall also examine a few of the transformations of matter taking place and discuss these
from a materialist perspective that problematises embodiment, suggesting that identity is
fluid and impossible to contain in clear-cut categories.

⁶ Of course we must also not forget the many non-human contributors that assist in the major project of making a
film, especially all the technical aids such as pens and papers, computers etc.
MY ENTRY POINTS

I did not literally tumble through a rabbit hole to gain access to the magical bathhouse in *Spirited Away*, nor to the tumultuous adventures of thesis writing. Although my points of entry into this project are of other kinds than a free fall through a hole in the ground, they also offer disorienting experiences and thus force me to question things I take for granted. This study of *Spirited Away* is my own Wonderland and my curiosity is the guide that will lead me through it. This section is dedicated to explaining how I approach my chosen topic in terms of theoretical and methodological positions as well as my assumptions. I will also include a discussion of previous research in this section, which will be closed by a description of how this study is structured.

First of all I will introduce the theoretical field that this study engages with, and also explain more in detail some theoretical concepts, related to materialist and/or posthumanist discourses, that have proven valuable for my analysis. New materialism/feminist materialism is a broad branch of philosophy that gives attention to entanglements between matter and spirit, body and mind, active and passive, and in doing so seeks to undermine the dualist oppositions between these and related concepts.\(^7\) In general, one of the terms in such a dichotomous binary is seen as inferior to the other, and in this way bodily and material aspects have been neglected in research, as well as in other kinds of discourse. Postmodern discourses with their focus on language and discursive constructions, although very influential in feminist thought, have been criticised for not being able to adequately account for lived, physical experiences and for perpetuating dichotomous thinking.\(^8\) Materialist approaches aim to deconstruct the binaries by acknowledging the forces associated with matter and thus destabilise the notion of matter as passive. Margrit Shildrick argues that what is needed is a rethinking of the opposition between material and discursive, one needs

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\(^7\) Although we should make sure to “not attempt to build such a philosophy by 'rejecting dualisms' or following any other meta-recipe”, Manuel DeLanda argues in an interview: Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 43.

to realise that they are intertwined, “mutually constitutive modes of becoming” rather than two separate terms that never intersect.⁹

This approach - to reveal the artificiality of the separation between the concepts – is used for battling against dichotomous thinking in general. The terms within a binary opposition are always, already entangled; there is a relation between the terms, as even a negation implies a relation. New materialist approaches aim to break through the dualism by complexifying the relation.¹⁰

One theoretical and methodological attempt to go past the dualist thought is the concept on intra-action. It is a term, coined by Karen Barad, that "refers to an interplay between non-bounded phenomena, which interpenetrate and mutually transform each other".¹¹ Whilst interaction assumes that the phenomena are separate, intra-action acknowledges the difficulty in discerning any fixed boundaries and opens up space for more dynamic ways of conceiving of communications and change.

Another concept that is relevant to this study is the concept of the Other - that which has to be objectified and marginalised in order for the hegemonic subject to appear as superior and normal. The concept has been thoroughly developed by especially feminist and postcolonial thinkers. Many scholars have observed that the effacing of the corporeal from discourse constitutes “a paradigmatic element in the oppression not only of women, but of a range of other others".¹² The Other can also refer to the relationships between humans and non-humans like animals and objects, where the latter are subjugated in order to allow the human agency to be unquestioned and absolute. This is a point made by posthumanist thinkers who, similar to feminist materialists, focus on material connections and the agency of matter.¹³ The posthumanist critique attacks anthropocentric world views and explores alternatives, for example by undermining the notion of the human being as an independent entity by exploring assemblages between the human and the non-human. 'Monster theory' is another strand of thought that examines the images that the dominant culture creates of the

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¹⁰ Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 97-98.
¹² Shildrick, 1.
¹³ For example Donna Haraway, Myra J. Hird and Rosi Braidotti.
beings considered as deviant from societal norms. Deconstructing the binary thinking and
decentering the human opens up for reflections on the interconnectedness of entities. If no
human is autonomous but rather part of different contexts, it is through our relationships to
the Others (human or non-human) that we humans define ourselves. This is reflected for
example in Rosi Braidotti’s theory of nomadic belongings, that accounts for this shift to an
ecological perspective - an approach through which "the subject is dissolved and re-grounded
in an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings".

I will now take you through some of the research that has been done in this field and
that also affects, one way or another, how I engage with the film. There is already some
research done on anime from a posthumanist perspective and focus is often on the crossovers
between humans and machines. For example the authors of Cinema Anime offer a section on
“Posthuman Bodies in the Animated Imaginary” that discusses phenomena like cyborgs (i.e.
hybrids between human bodies and technology) and the move towards regarding life as
information and cybernetics. The attitudes vis-à-vis posthumanity are often mixed and this is
a standard theme within this genre: “In anime, the intersection of humanity and technology
usually results in an ambivalent mixture of power and control, [...] of empowerment and
alienation”.

Nevertheless, Shana Heinricy comments that Japanese stories are full of positive
renderings of physical transformations. While bodily change is feared in Western culture,
“anime tends to embrace bodies in states of 'becoming'”. As an example she mentions the
body of the character Haku in Spirited Away. He changes between human form and dragon
and this is depicted as something magical that one has no reason to fear. Heinricy argues that
one reason for the positive approach to changing bodies and to technology visible in
contemporary Japanese culture can be found in its longstanding history of telling stories on
this topic. Mythologies of changing bodies in combination with the technological progress in
Japan “has created a cultural site for anime to show morphing creatures and cyborgs as

14 See for example Margrit Shildrick, Jeffrey J. Cohen and Elaine L. Graham.
16 Carl Silvio. “Animated Bodies and Cybernetic Selves: The Animatrix and the Question of Posthumanity”. In
17 Shana Heinricy. “Take a Ride on the Catbus”. In Anime and Philosophy, eds. Josef Steiff and Tristan D. Tamplin
(Chicago/La Salle: Open Court, 2010), 4.
possibilities, rather than monsters”.

In a similar vein, Jensen and Blok write that the interest in fusions of technology and spiritual capacities is not unique to animated stories: “Japanese narratives routinely make spirits, robots and animals co-habit in the world in ways that ignore boundaries between human and extra-human realms”. They argue that this is an effect of the Japanese ‘techno-animism’, a kind of animism influenced by Shinto as well as by technology.

Posthumanist materialist research specifically on Spirited Away is not so common. The film has inspired several analyses with emphasis on cultural identity. Susan Napier, who has done a lot of research on anime, reads Spirited Away as "a complex exploration of a contemporary Japan that is searching for what might be termed cultural recovery, or perhaps cultural rehabilitation, in a corrupt postindustrial society". Hiroshi Yamanaka also analyses the film against the cultural Japanese backdrop and argues that “Chihiro’s success in recovering her true name and thus her true identity is a metaphor for the possibility that her audience can do the same in a time of economic, cultural, and spiritual malaise when what it means to be Japanese has become an open question.” The theme of the film is here viewed as a quest for true identity and identification for the audience in a modern Japan where old grand narratives have been eroded. Although I find that Yamanaka’s emphasis on identity as collective and not only residing in the individual fits well with the theoretical frame I have chosen, I will attempt ways of reading that allow space also for ambiguity and fluidity.

Let me now situate myself and account for the assumptions that I bring into this study and that influence the directions I take. The most obvious bias is probably the fact that I am human and and as such I am likely to see things from a human-centred point of view. The activity of writing a thesis is of course in itself a human activity; if I had been a dog or a dumpling I would most likely never have written these words. This leads me to pose the question (to which I have not yet found an answer): how can I attempt to claim posthumanist

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18 Heinricy, 5.
20 Napier, 288-289.
points of view without trying to speak for the non-human? Furthermore, I am aware that my European and scholarly perspectives push me in some directions, while discouraging me to take other turns. For example, I am not likely to notice details and themes that bear specific cultural meanings in the Japanese context where the film originated. Anime, the Japanese art of animation, is also a genre with well-established themes and a culture of its own, that I must admit is to a great extent beyond my ken. What I am proposing is a reading guided by the feminist convictions that put me on the path of questioning boundaries and categories and trying to prise new spaces of interpretation among the culturally sedimented norms and truths. Naturally my feminist affinities influence what scenes, motifs and themes I find interesting and noteworthy in my reading of the film, as well as the way I interpret these. My way of approaching and interpreting the material is also influenced by my interest in Buddhist philosophy, that shares with posthumanism the focus on deconstructing the human supremacy, for example by emphasising that the constant processes of change render impossible any notion of the human as a stable unity. Thus, my theoretical and personal positionings guide my methodological choices. Regarding methods I also rely on close reading, “that is, an analysis that gives priority to a focus on the details of a text (its rhetorical gestures, tropes, imagery, pronouns, proper names etc.).” This means that I will select elements and examine these closely, exploring associations and connotations and then discuss these along with the theoretical concepts I have chosen to use. I also draw on narratological notions in analysing the structure of the film, in particular the term masterplot that denotes a widely recognised kind of plot that strongly influences how we interpret.

Let me now explain how the remaining part of this study is organised. The first chapter of the analysis deals with the notions of agency and magic. Magic is an omnipresent force in the bathhouse that creates connections between different bodies and that also bridges the language-matter divide. By making inanimate matter come alive, magic points to a conception of life as relations rather than as possession. However, magic also reveals the

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22 A similar conundrum has been discussed in postcolonial theory; trying to retrieve and represent the discourses of society's Others implies speaking for them and thereby confirming their marginal position. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999).
23 Lykke, 187.
hierarchies at work, as not all animate(d) beings have the capacity or the right to use it.

The first chapter is followed by three chapters focused on eating, understood as a kind of intra-action between different kinds of matter. Food is, as I will show, important in the negotiations of boundaries and agency. The question of who is eating who also reveals some of the power relationships that govern the posthuman world depicted in the film.

In the two last chapters of the analysis I will, so to speak, push the food plate aside in favour of other matters. The fifth chapter will focus on the physical transformations taking place in the film and how these can be interpreted from a posthumanist and materialist perspective. I will look at embodiments, using a narratologically influenced perspective that allows for corporeal ambiguities and shuns notions of bodies as fixed and clearly separate from other bodies. The discussion will continue in the final chapter where I will use ‘monster theory’ to further examine the leakages between categories. The monstrous corresponds not necessarily to widely-spread images of monsters (known from various cultural masterplots) or to bodies that distinctly disobey the norms. “It is, above all, the corporeal ambiguity and fluidity, the troublesome lack of fixed definition, that marks the monstrous as a site of disruption”, Shildrick explains.25 With this in mind I will show how the monstrous in the film can disrupt habitual, anthropocentric interpretations and instead suggest a posthumanist reading that defies categories like human-animal and Self-Other.

25 Shildrick, 80.
II. ANALYSIS

Agency and Magic

In this first chapter of the analysis I will examine the notion of agency, understood as the capacity to act in a rather broad sense. I will discuss it along with magic, which is a prominent phenomenon in the diegesis. But first I will say a few words about animation. Animation – the act of bringing alive - can refer to the film medium (the word is also the origin of the Japanese abbreviation ‘anime’). Heinricy claims that animation is the perfect medium for portraying bodies in change. “Animation, all forms of animation, focuses on plasticity of bodies” and animated bodies need not follow our human notions of reality, but can open up for new possibilities. Animation refers also to making something move and act as if alive. As I have already stated, the bathhouse is a world where matter comes alive or, more precisely, matter is animated by magic. The various transformations of matter that take place in the bathhouse, including the animation of 'dead' matter, are explained by the omnipresent magic. Thus magic functions as a kind of overarching explanation that gives credibility to these strange events and allows the laws of nature and life (as we know them from our human world) to be suspended. Yubaba, the bathhouse boss, rules the bathhouse by magic and she is not the only one to use magic to make her wishes materialise. Even though it is not made explicit in the film, there are clearly rules and hierarchies that govern the use of magic in the bathhouse (who is capable/allowed to use magic and for what purposes?).

Stacey and Suchman notice the distinction between animate and animated. Animate beings - organisms – are seen as having a life of their own by embodying inherent processes of transformation, whilst the animated need to be set in motion by an outside force. “Even for biological organisms, however, the conception of life as possession, something held and located inside the entity that lives, is a culturally and historically specific one.” The authors remark that the conception of life as possession supports the idea of the humanist subject, regarded as rational, autonomous and with clear boundaries. Similarly, agency becomes located inside, an inherent property. From a posthumanist perspective one can regard life,

26 Heinricy, 8-9.
28 Idem.
as well as agency, as relations rather than inherent qualities; this will allow space for connections and assemblages. Agency is not a question of possession but “ongoing reconfigurations of the world”.29

With these remarks on life and agency in mind, I will now move on to analysing the agency of the agents in the film. Of course, since this is an animated film, the characters and objects are all animated by the film production team. However, I will leave that aspect aside and focus on the film plot. The agency shown in the film is often a collective effort, rather than something pertaining to a certain body. However, the images of this collective agency are rather dark; the workers toil in slave-like conditions. Kamaji, the multi-legged creature working in the boiler room, appears to be almost a part of the machinery that makes the baths function and he even sleeps at his work station. To assist him in his task he has a myriad of little soot balls - soot that has been animated through magic to serve as workers. In the beginning of the film, when Chihiro asks Kamaji for a job, he refuses as he has already all the workers he needs. If need be, he can always conjure up more workers by casting a spell on the soot that abounds in the boilers. These little critters do have emotions that we may think of as human; they clearly develop affections for Chihiro, which they show for example by carrying her shoes and socks (they are not capable of speaking). Kamaji explains that they will turn back to soot if they do not work, this suggests that they serve a pragmatic function - being a part of the workplace assemblage - and if they cease to perform their duties, there is nothing to legitimise their existence.30 The soot balls are clearly expendable. Magic makes objects or matter such as soot come alive, but undermines at the same time 'life' as the privilege of the individual. By inspiring life in inanimate objects, it also serves to question the human(ist) notion of life: “To imagine a world in which all materialities have animating capacities is to posit a concept of life that no longer belongs exclusively to human or the animal”.31 Kamaji, in his turn, claims to be a “slave to the boilers that heat the baths”, a metaphor that confirms the image of the bathhouse as one big assemblage of agencies where

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30 However, the soot balls have given rise to a lot of affection from fans of the film; they have for example their own fan page on facebook. Evidently their animated existence has expanded and they have, in a way, got a life outside of the film diegesis.

31 Stacey & Suchman, 14.
the agency of animate beings is not necessarily more privileged than the inanimate, or animated, agency of for example boiler machines. Thus, the non-human agency in the film can be either animate or animated. Either way, being part of these agential forces does not implicate having the right to mobilise the agency at one’s discretion.

Magic, which I understand as a will to influence and control matter in a certain way, is implicated in the power hierarchies. However, even though Yubaba appears almost like an omniscient creator of the bathhouse world, her powers are not absolute. Once the spell has been cast, it is to some extent beyond her control. The spell that Yubaba casts to steal Chihiro’s name and make her forget it (which forces Chihiro to remain in service in the bathhouse), is nullified when Chihiro retrieves a greeting card with her name written on it. The physical artefact helps jog Chihiro’s memory and helps her free herself from the bondages of Yubaba’s magic. This constitutes an example of the agency of matter, in this case the greeting card, and shows how the spells may change in the encounters with matter.

Thus, if magic entails a will to control matter, it is not an absolute power; magic, and matter, can well have a life of their own. Yubaba’s beloved baby and a bird-like creature who also lives in the household, are transformed by Yubaba’s sister Zeniba as a revenge on her sister for stealing from her. When Chihiro asks Zeniba to transform them back, she replies that the spell has worn off long ago and that they stay in the bodies by their own free will instead of re-turning to their previous forms. This suggests that magic, rather than being the extension of the absolute will of the person who cast the spell, can be seen as a force that works through several agents. Zeniba also transforms the three separate animate(d) heads that jump around in Yubaba’s apartment, into a single body, namely the shape of Yubaba’s baby. This means that magic also can traverse the boundaries, and bridge the gaps, between what we normally perceive as separate entities.

So far in this chapter, I have discussed magic as a force that traverses, and thereby connects, different bodies. I have also concluded that by animating matter, magic bestows the matter with some agency although a very restricted one - the bathhouse community does not allow for individualist notions of life. I will now continue to discuss the material aspects of magic. Although magical spells may be thought of as the uttering of a certain sequence of words, the spells in Spirited Away can assume material form. This is shown in the example of
the cursed seal belonging to Zeniba, that Haku has stolen on Yubaba’s orders. The spell makes Haku very ill and he returns to the bathhouse bleeding profusely after being attacked by an army of paper birds (sent out by Zeniba to stop him). Haku is in his dragon incarnation at the time and Chihiro tries to bring him somewhere safe, away from Yubaba. They end up on the floor in the boiler room, and Kamaji remarks: “It looks like he is bleeding from the inside”. Chihiro saves his life by forcing between his fangs a piece of a magic mud ball and this makes Haku throw up the seal covered in a black goo, that rapidly takes the shape of a little black slug. It is the spell that has assumed slug form and Chihiro crushes it under her foot when it tries to escape. (However, it later turns out that the slug was not the protective spell put in the seal by Yubaba’s sister, but instead a spell cast on Haku by Yubaba herself, in order to control him). The embodiment of the curse (a linguistic construct) can be seen as an example of the entanglements between matter and meaning. This shows that the body, even the body of the tiniest slug, can indeed be inscribed with discursive meaning and power to influence other bodies. Magic is material as well as discursive and semiotic and participates in the material-discursive phenomena such as bodies. Magic can be seen as a force that traverses, not only the boundaries between bodies, but also the matter – language divide.

The film ends with the family returning to their car, finding it all covered in dust and leaves as if it has been left there for a long time, which confirms Chihiro’s version of the story (the parents clearly have no memories of their extended stay). Whether any effects of these transformations linger in the minds and bodies of Chihiro and her parents is left untold. However, the fact that Chihiro is still wearing the magic hair tie spun by Zeniba and her friends in the otherworld as she returns to her human world, is a tangible material memory of her stay on the ‘other side’. This material trace suggests that some of the magic follows her on her path. And as magic, according to the film’s logic, is the fabric that creates change (although not necessarily in a liberatory sense) and allows for the unexpected to be materialised, it leaves the spectator with a feeling that Chihiro’s adventures does not leave her unmarked. At least, the fact that this magical-material trace follows Chihiro as she exits the spirit realm and returns to her human world, serves to some extent to undermine the boundaries between these two worlds.

32 Barad, 141.
In this chapter I have discussed how magic problematises the notion of agency and the power hierarchies in the bathhouse. By animating matter, such as the soot in the boiler room, magic grants it some agency but it also reveals power inequalities. Some of the beings (such as Yubaba and Zeniba) have the power to use magic on others, while other beings (such as the animated soot balls, but also Chihiro herself) are instead subject to the power of magic. It seems however that the spells, at least to some extent, are malleable and may adapt to the circumstances. I have also discussed magic as a force that traverses the boundaries between different subjects, thus pointing to their permeability. The permeability of boundaries is a topic that will be pursued in the following chapters, focused on eating.

*Eat or/and Be Eaten?*

The next three chapters of the analysis are centred around the notion of food and its importance for the events in the film. Another important key word is boundaries. As boundaries are that which separate for example subjects from objects and one term from its binary Other, they become really interesting from a posthumanist perspective that problematises the notion of bounded entities and talks about intra-action rather than interaction. Haraway argues that it is in social interaction that the boundaries of objects are materialised and that objects never pre-exist as such. “Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies.”33 In this chapter I will examine the boundaries at play in *Spirited Away*. As material exchanges are important in the processes of boundary-making, I will examine food exchanges as an example of this. In this chapter, as well as in later ones, I will also discuss some of the results of the production and upkeeping of the boundaries in terms of ethical implications and power relationships. Although a posthuman (or at least non-human) society, such as the one depicted in the film, lacks some of the boundaries we recognise from our human world, there are still others that must not be breached.

Conflicts between reality/rationality and fantasy is a common theme in children’s fiction and it figures also in *Spirited Away*. Chihiro’s parents represent a rational logic that,

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although not exactly undermined, is at least questioned. The family enters the realm through
the tunnel that marks the boundary between the human world, where rationality is law, and
the non-human world where other laws govern and where the parents’ logic brings them
trouble. The father touches the decaying walls of the building they pass through and finds
that they are made of plaster. He declares that it must be an abandoned theme park, that
got down with the crashing economy. The streets in the area they enter are all deserted,
lined with eateries but with no people around. The father catches and follows a scent in the
air (almost like a hunting dog would hunt down its prey), and they reach a restaurant that
appears to be open. The counter is full of platters of freshly cooked food, most of which
appear to be meat dishes. Legs of poultry and juicy steaks lie there in steaming piles and the
parents are rapidly seduced by the delicious odour and appearance of the food. However there
is no one there to take their orders and Chihiro wants to leave the place, afraid that the staff
will be angry upon finding them eating there without previous permission. The father, while
resolutely helping himself to the food, reassures Chihiro that it is no problem as he has both
cash and cards to assure their payment. In the world he normally inhabits, money is evidently
the answer and the solution to at least most problems, but this is not the human world and
the human currency is presumably of no value here. Horrified, Chihiro leaves the parents by
the restaurant counter, busy gorging themselves with food, and goes exploring the
surroundings on her own. She spots the bathhouse on the other side of a bridge where she
encounters Haku, one of the humanoid workers in the bathhouse. He exhorts her to leave
quickly, before it gets dark. She returns to the restaurant and finds her parents there, still
greedily devouring the food but they have now turned into pigs! The only remaining vestiges
of humanity, that also make them recognisable as Chihiro’s parents, are the clothes that they
are still wearing (although these are now very ill-fitting and threaten to burst under the strain
of the excessive, and still expanding, flesh). The kitchen staff is whipping them - the food was
cooked for the gods and not intended for human consumption. The father/pig falls heavily to
the ground with a beastly scream. I will return to this scene of corporeal transformation in the
next chapter, where I discuss these transformations and their becoming part of the food
chain. For now, I will leave the parents/pigs there, abused by the staff for their transgression,
while I bring the reader into one of the ensuing scenes, which involves another physical
transformation.

Shocked by seeing her parents in such a condition, Chihiro runs from the place. At first she refuses to believe that it is really her own human parents that have undergone such a radical change and she calls out for them, but of course nobody responds. The place is no longer a ghost town; as night falls this realm comes alive and the streets are now filling up with strange, shadowy creatures. The meadow through which the family entered, has now filled up with water and become a river. When Chihiro finally realises she is stuck on this side of the river with her parents turned into pigs, she panics. Huddling alone by the riverside in the dark while, not far from her, a lit-up boat full of strange creatures arrives, she tells herself: “I’m dreaming”, “it’s just a dream”. She repeats the words “go away” and "disappear", trying to will the dream to go away. But instead it is her own body that responds to the mantra and starts to fade away, resisting Chihiro’s notions of what is real and what is a dream. Chihiro’s body is the one beginning to lose its status as real, slowly turning into a ghostly appearance and it frightens her. Help is at hand however in the shape of Haku, who tells her that she needs to eat something from this world, as she otherwise will turn transparent. Assuring her that the food will not turn her into a pig, Haku offers her a morsel that immediately restores her physical solidity.

It appears that, even in this otherworld where physical appearances are fluid, losing your form may imply a loss, at least if your status is one of a human intruder in this non-human world. Although it is not clear what a translucent existence would be like for Chihiro, it seems to be an undesirable one. Perhaps the capacity for human agency requires a basis of solid matter. To sum up what I have discussed so far in terms of transgressions of boundaries: for humans venturing into this forbidden realm, there are at least two dangers – being turned into a pig or becoming transparent and both entail being deprived of your (human) capacity for agency.

I will now turn to theory for thoughts of how I can interpret these exchanges of matter. According to ANT (Actor Network Theory), the world is made up of actants. Myra J. Hird writes in her discussion of Bruno Latour’s thoughts that an actant could be anything from an atom to a politician, defined only by its relations to other actants, not by any inner essence. Actants gain strength and power through the allies they make. For example, an atom is
regarded as more real than a ghost because is has more allies: “Experiments testify to the atom’s existence; instruments stabilize it and make it indirectly visible; generations of children learn of it and pass the word along.” Thus, being real is about having allies, often non-human, that confirm your presence and your agency; reality is all about relations. Having established this, let us return to the film scene. Chihiro evidently has a strong ally in Haku, but also the food serves as an allied actant, giving her enough material force to subsist. The food thus re-establishes the boundaries of her body. Paradoxically however, the food - this piece of the magical world that she incorporates - remains on the inside of her body which undermines the idea that the body is autonomous and separate from the rest of the world. The corporeal boundaries may be reinforced, but at the same time they are destabilised, at least if the notion of boundaries include separation from the rest of the world. Chihiro forms connections with the other actants, animate as well as inanimate, and it is these connections that allow her to stay in this world instead of fading into a ghostly nothingness. The interconnectedness I have emphasised above challenges the view of the human subject as an independent entity and supports instead an ecological take on the formation and upkepping of subject boundaries. To describe these kinds of movements across bodies, Stacy Alaimo proposes the term trans-corporeality, which “reveals the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human”.

The food exchanges and their consequences that I have discussed so far, show that food is vital in the production of subject boundaries, but food participates also in the making of social borders. Napier writes that Chihiro is “initially signified as a polluting alien marked by her human stench, but gradually she becomes incorporated into the bathhouse collectivity where she grows in agency and maturity”. As soon as Chihiro is found out and her status as human revealed, the workers in the bathhouse want to get rid of her because of her disgusting human stench: “We’re not gonna take her in our department!” and “She’ll stink up the whole place!” are two of the reactions. However, Haku (who has some authority due to his

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35 Ibid., 17.
37 Napier, 290.
work position) commands them to let her stay and says that her malodour is bound to vanish after a few days on the local diet: “Three days of eating our food and her smell will go away. And if she doesn't work hard; roast her, boil her, do whatever you want. Now get back to work”. Chihiro’s foreignness -or Otherness- is therefore a matter of matter. Or rather, this shows how social discourses of belonging are entangled with material aspects. Becoming part of the community cannot be reduced to mere discourse, it certainly has a material, tangible (and edible) aspect. By eating the local food, she will become (more like) a local, which means that the material exchanges involved in eating indeed has an important role in negotiating, not only the individual’s boundaries (as seen in the case of Chihiro’s transparency) but also in defining community boundaries.

At the same time, the risk of actually becoming the food is an ever-present threat. Chihiro escapes her parents’ destiny, namely turning into pigs, but she is not safe as long as she remains the Other. Haku’s words, quoted above, shows that Chihiro runs the risk of being roasted and boiled, i.e. transformed into comestible matter, if she fails to conform to the community standards. The community rule is clear on this point; become part of the community by eating our food or else get ready for our saucepans. Eat or be eaten is the assimilationist logic revealed by the material-discursive practices at work. One way or another you have to partake in the circulation of matter. It seems that food is indeed an important part of the community fabric of the bathhouse and in the next chapter I will pull harder at these threads in order to examine this social, and material, fabric.

**Who Is Actually Eating Whom?**

"No community works without food, without eating together". As Haraway points out, there is no way of eating alone as eating always takes place in a context and involves exchanges between different species; “human and nonhuman ways of living and dying are at stake in practices of eating”. This prompts me to look at the acts of eating from a posthumanist perspective that reveals the cultural contingency in the hierarchy of the food chain.

One detail in the film is the appearance of a dried newt, an evidently sought-after

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39 Ibid., 295.
delicacy used as a bribe to persuade others to do favours for you. Even though there are frogs working in the bathhouse - and salamanders and frogs are similar animals (at least from my human and, I must admit, rather anthropocentric perspective) – eating salamanders is not regarded as strange. What is considered as suitable, 'kosher' food is evidently cultural and eating newts is in this world considered no more strange than eating pigs. Or, for that matter, eating humans turned into pigs. Chihiro's parents are transformed into pigs, animals associated with gluttony, as punishment after feasting on the food cooked for the gods. The scene makes me think of the biblical tale where Adam and Eve, after eating the forbidden fruits of knowledge, are thrown out of the divine realm. But in this case, instead of gaining knowledge the human couple is punished by being reduced to a state of oblivion, losing all memories of having been human. Their excessive consumption radically alters not only their bodies but also demotes them and deprives them of communication skills. From being the carnivore eaters - the ones high up in the food chain - they become the food matter, destined to return to the food chain as bacon on the gods' table. A scene later in the film shows a whole barn full of pigs - one might suspect that they are all visitors from the outside being transformed, and commoditised, into animals to be consumed. The (ex-)humans and the other creatures inhabiting this world are "companion species" to borrow Haraway's term, they live in an interspecies interdependence as “messmates in mortal play”.40

The human exceptionalism inherent in the taken-for-granted privilege to eat others but not be eaten in return clearly has no validity in this non-human world. Here, humans have a material value as food matter or else no value at all. This could be read as an ironic reversal of the conditions in the world we inhabit, where animals are bred as commodities to provide humans with for example food and living matter for pharmaceutical testings and genetic experiments.

So far in this chapter I have given attention to elements in the film that support my reading, critical of anthropocentrism. I would however like to point out the anthropocentric aspects of the scenes of eating and transformation discussed above. The negative image of pigs as associated with excessive eating and beastly untidiness is obviously a human construction. It is way of depicting the animal Other in a way that reinscribes the image of

40 Haraway (2008), 19.
the human subject as moderate and tidy. At the same time the notion of fixed boundaries between the animal Other and the human Self become undermined by this physical polymorphism. Radical changes to the appearance and behaviour of the physical body pose a challenge the idea that a certain phenotypical expression is irrevocably linked to a certain essence. I will continue this discussion in the two last chapters of the analysis.

**The Dangers of Transgression**

The bathhouse community includes and excludes at the same time. There are boundaries that must not be transgressed and all beings are clearly not equal. The parents punishment of being turned into pigs shows what happens when you break the community rules (a community that they, as newly arrived strangers, are not even part of). Their sin consists of eating food destined for the gods, but they are also punished for the excess of eating. Staying within the limits of moderation seems required of the community members and failure to comply with this norm marks an alien as such.

Another example of excessive consumption with negative consequences is the eating binge that the character called No Face goes on. The name refers to their lack of face; in lieu of a face there is an expressionless mask and the body is shapeless as well. Like Chihiro, No Face is initially semi-transparent, which mirrors the outsider status. In the beginning of the story, while No Face is seen loitering outside of the bathhouse, they seem harmless and do not even speak but only utters unintelligible sounds. However, once inside the perimeters of the building, they are transformed into a monster of endless cravings. The bathhouse staff is seduced by the gold that No Face materialise in their hands and offer as payment to all those that bring food. The sight of the gold causes near-hysteria and brings out the greed in the workers, who all want their share of the riches. No Face gorge on all the food that comes their way and eventually starts to eat the bathhouse staff, causing panic. It only takes a moment for the euphoric atmosphere in the hall to change to collective fear and panic. Even though it is

41 I have chosen to use a gender neutral 'they' as pronoun for No Face, as they lack the typical characteristics (such as voice) that are usually evaluated when ascribing a sex/gender to a human being. One could argue that the same should be done for all the non-anthropomorphic beings in the film – why assume that non-humans have the same sex/gender characteristics as humans? Or indeed, why assume things about others' sex/gender at all? Nevertheless I have chosen to assign sex/gender to the other characters and thereby stay within the conventions of the gender binary. Interesting to note is that all the major characters (except No Face, assuming that their repeated appearances is taken as a sign of such a status, which is debatable) have both humanoid and clearly gendered bodies (at least some of the time).
not easy for the spectator to comprehend the logic of the food chain in this world, e.g. who has the right to eat who, it is evident from their reactions that No Face have no right to consume the bodies they claim. This violation of the community boundaries and rules is greatly disturbing the order and even Yubaba cannot control No Face. No Face embody well the figure of the Other – the marginal being that is assigned the negative qualities that the dominant forces in society refuse to acknowledge in themselves. No Face are considered a monster because of their excessive, and not sociably suitable, desires while the workers themselves are burning with desire to lay their hands on yet another grain of gold. The monstrous greed is thereby projected onto the Other, which allows the community to remain unquestioned and intact. I will return to this topic in the final chapter.

An interesting detail to note is that No Face’s devouring seems to take place in a mutual exchange. They eat only the beings that have previously accepted the gold No Face offer them (a gold that later turns into dust when the magic wears off). No Face pay the people in gold for the right to eat them – matter exchanged for matter. Chihiro refuses to take their gold and consequently she is never harmed by No Face, who even develops affections for her. In a scene prior to No Face’s food binge, they try to offer Chihiro a bunch of bath tokens (that Chihiro needs in order to run the baths) but she refuses the offer as there are too many tokens and she only needs one at a time. Refusing the material gift that vehicles No Face’s emotions and offer of friendship, she refuses to form a material-emotional alliance with No Face (at least on No Face’s terms). No Face immediately begin to turn transparent, presumably as a result of this failure to form a connection. No Face evidently have the power to do magic, which, in other scenes appear connected to high community status. Despite this capacity, No Face remain a marginal character, for reasons that are obscure.

It seems that No Face, like Chihiro, need to make material alliances in order to gain agency in this world. This is done for example through eating. No Face start to mimic the voice of the frog they have just devoured and thus they turn into an assemblage of intersubjective agency, finally bestowed with a voice to express their desires. Food is often assumed to be dead matter, killed before consumption (oyster eaters – feel free to disagree). However, in this case the food is not inanimate but a living frog, who turns out to be still alive when No Face later throw up all that they have eaten. It is interesting to note that the food in
this example gives the eater something we normally recognise as uniquely human, namely a voice. This has perhaps less relevance in a world where (nearly) all the beings, including the animals, have this capacity for speech. The scene provides another example of the agency associated with the food, but the agency turns out to be temporary and conditional. Chihiro, the only one to have an influence over No Face, finally manages to throw a piece of the magic mud ball into No Face's mouth (the same ball she gives to Haku to evacuate the bad spell). This has a purgative effect, starting a violent vomiting. All the food, including the living beings that No Face have swallowed, exits in a rather spectacular spewing. When the food is thrown up, No Face returns to the position of an alien, someone who does not belong in the community. Some material exchanges are clearly not sociably acceptable (even though they are implicitly mutual) and any transgression of these boundaries needs to be reversed or in some way amended. Vomiting functions here as normalisation. In a later chapter I will return to this theme of purity and order that need to be restored, as I find it a rather troubling one that merits some attention.

**Problematic Incarnations**

In the following part of the analysis I will take a look at *Spirited Away* from a narratological perspective, that allows me to examine more in detail how the story unfolds and how the storytelling practices can be viewed in the light of posthumanist and materialist concerns. As a firm believer in the power of storytelling to create change as well as to reinforce status quo, I think it is important to make explicit this power of stories by looking at the machinery behind the scenes, so to speak.

First, let me introduce the term masterplot that I will use in my discussions. Masterplot refers to an oft-repeated type of plot, that is easily recognised by the audience and that has a strong power to guide interpretations. Masterplots can be found in all kinds of fiction, but is also used (consciously or unconsciously) in non-fiction such as news reports. *Spirited Away* certainly contains several elements that can be read in terms of masterplots. For example, the plot presents a coming-of-age story where the protagonist grows in wisdom and maturity through the hardships she is forced to endure. The friendship that develops between Chihiro and Haku also follows a plot that most viewers recognise as a budding romance, starting with

42 Abbott, 42ff.
the female protagonist being saved by the male (this happens early on in the story when Haku gives Chihiro the food that stops her from becoming transparent). The interpretation of their growing intimacy as love is confirmed by other characters in the story. However, Yamanaka points out that Miyazaki’s plots are different than the typical Western masterplots. For example, whereas the witches in Western fairytales typically are thoroughly evil – stereotypical images of negative femininity - the witch Yubaba, as well as her sister Zeniba, turn out to be not altogether bad.43

When I began studying the film I observed that the transformations appear to be transitory, as if the closure of the story demands that the bodies be brought back to their 'original' state. This interpretation suggests that subject boundaries are only temporarily flexible. Under the influence of magic bodies may change, but sooner or later the magic wears off and the physical forms will return to normal. Chihiro’s parents must be liberated from their porcine existence and re-turned to human form. It is, after all, a children’s movie and as such it demands a happy ending; having a parent that communicates by grunts and eats like a pig (pardon my pun) is hardly compatible with the conventions of this genre. It falls upon Chihiro to save her parents, i.e. transform them back to humans. Similarly, Haku remembers suddenly, with the help of Chihiro, that he used to be a river spirit before he was trapped by Yubaba’s magic and this realisation allows him to liberate himself.

This demand for the right kind of closure could be seen as compliance with existing masterplots – for the plot to reach its dénouement, restoring the order is required by the narrative conventions and the audience (myself included) that calls for a satisfactory ending. Several critics have written on the identity themes of the film. For example, the already mentioned article by Yamanaka claims that the message of the film is that “what matters most is keeping our own deeper individuality”.44 From a posthumanist theoretical framework, the notion of a 'deeper individuality' might lead to problematic conclusions as it suggests a belief in an essence that shuns ambiguities and possibilities of change. So, are there other ways of reading the physical transformations in Spirited Away, ways of going against the grain of those narrative conventions that I often take for granted myself? Napier observes that the

43 Yamanaka, 246.
44 Ibid., 242. However, Yamanaka stresses that the Japanese view of individuality is different from the Western ones; less based in the individual and more established in social networks.
restoration of purity is an important trope in the movie: “through the use of the alienating and impure presence of Chihiro and others, Spirited Away suggests the fundamental permeability of boundaries, evoking a liminal world of uncertainty, loss, constantly changing identities, and abandoned simulacra, where old truths and patterns no longer seem to hold”\footnote{Napier, 295.}. This hints at the futility of relying on well bounded entities that can be 'polluted' by 'the Other'. I will now pursue this track further and examine how posthumanist materialist perspectives may inspire interpretations that do not rely on identity as an unchanging essence.

Constant change is inevitable. Even the maintenance of, say a human body, requires constant changes and adjustments on a cellular level just to keep the system stable and keep up the illusion of continuity. This constant flow of changes imply that even that which appears to be a return to a previous state, is nothing but yet another transformation, although it morphologically may resemble a previous form. To account for a corporeal continuity without essence, I quote Judith Butler's notion of performativity according to which the body “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality”\footnote{Judith Butler. Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1999), 173.}. Rather than a matter of manifesting an inner core, identity is about repeatedly performing certain acts which creates an illusion of stability and permanence. This means that even though the parents' pig bodies are transformed into human bodies, it cannot be the same human bodies as before. As the philosopher's saying has it: you cannot twice step into the same river as neither you nor the river will be exactly the same\footnote{This quote is attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus.}. Nor does Haku's transformation into a river spirit mean that he will become the same river as before he entered human(oid) form.

The bodies of Haku and Chihiro's parents could, as an alternative interpretation, be regarded in terms of their polymorphism, i.e. the ability to assume different shapes. Is is more evident in the case of Haku, who apparently can shift between his human and his dragon incarnations at will. A posthumanist materialist approach suggests a focus on metamorphosis, instead of narratives based on linearity and progress. Such an approach helps avoid teleological way of conceiving of change and opens up for a multiplicity of outcomes. Acknowledging the capacity of matter to change entails a sceptic attitude towards
the possibility to represent matter. “Matter is a transformative force in itself, which, in its ongoing change, will not allow any representation to take root.”⁴⁸ Universal, stable representations are impossible in a world of morphological diversity and this seems to apply to our human world and the spirit realm in Spirited Away alike. The changing bodies can be seen as proof of this; instead of bounded entities they can be regarded as phenomena, “beings in their differential becoming, particular material (re)configurations of the world with shifting boundaries and properties”.⁴⁹

To sum up the contents of this chapter, with an effort it is possible to resist the deeply ingrained patterns of interpretation such as linear masterplots. An alternative is to see the different incarnations as equally valid expressions, without resorting to thinking in terms of a true and permanent form. This leads me to the question: what if the Difference (such as the non-human) is not something outside, residing in the Other, but instead something inherent in all bodies that is manifested through the different transformations? This topic has already been touched upon, but I will pursue it further in the following and final part of the analysis.

**Who Is the Monster Anyway?**

*Spirited Away* features several beings that I spontaneously label as monsters, presumably because they are (I flatter myself) beings radically different from me. No Face in their state of excessive consumption constitute an exemplary monster; disrespectful of social boundaries, uncontrollable, and with a set of intimidating teeth to complete the image. However, the posthumanist approach I have chosen as an entry point, urges me to reverse the glance and to question the assumptions I bring to my meetings with the Other. What is needed is a reflection on the interconnectedness, knowing that “the very ontology of the entities emerges through relationality: the entities do not preexist their involvement.”⁵⁰ In this final chapter I move to monster theory to discuss the boundaries between categories such as Self and Other, human and non-human. The monstrous is a “disruptive force”⁵¹ that causes leakages between the categories and thereby challenges the categories that, although failing to account for the

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⁴⁹ Barad, 136.
⁵¹ Shildrick, 1.
lived reality, evidently have a conceptual existence in my mind and in the Western culture I inhabit.

The monstrous is perceived as quite safe and unproblematic from our human perspective as long as it remains so different that it can clearly be placed in an “oppositional category of not-me”.\(^52\) Throughout the film, such a positioning is obstructed. From the very beginning, Chihiro stands out from the crowd because of her human stench and thus humanity is tainted with monstrosity. The parents turning into grunting beasts of insatiable food cravings and with no visible traces of human-ness left, puts them on the same level of monstrosity and beastly desires as for example No Face. To regard their bodies as polymorphic suggests the interpretation that the pig characteristics were there all the time, the pig bodies are not temporary aberrations from their physical norms as humans. Turning into monster/pig bodies is rather a sign of their already existing greed and untidiness (though, as I have already remarked, this negative image of pigs is problematic). I should quickly add that, by “already existing” I do not imply any innate and permanent personality traits; these qualities can be regarded as habit patterns, of body as well as of mind.

According to Shildrick there is reason to regard:

“[…] all bodies as unable to comply with the norms through which they enter the space of discourse, and thus of what counts as reality. It is not that some bodies are reducible to the same while others figure as the absolute other, but rather that all resist full or final expression. The security of categories – whether self or non-self - is undone by a radical undecidability.”\(^53\)

This radical undecidability undermines the stability of categories and leads to a rethinking of embodiment that defies notions of purity and essence.

Interestingly No Face becomes the monster \textit{after} entering the bathhouse, as though it is the bathhouse that brings out the monster qualities. Arguably No Face pick up more than the voice as they ingest the frog, they also adopt his greed. No Face start to materialise gold in their hands as prior events have shown that this is a popular currency that gives the donor privileges. No Face come to embody the greed and the excess that already is part of the community. Jeffrey J. Cohen writes that by “revealing that difference is arbitrary and

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 2-3.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 2.
potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential, the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed”.54 No Face bring the greed to the surface of the community and expose this, which could easily start causing rifts. After expelling No Face from the bathhouse, the community can heave a sigh of relief; the threat to the community is neutralised. But of course, the monstrous, this inability to fully comply with norms and ideals, remains within the community and its members.

III. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The aim I set out for this study was to combine posthumanist and materialist lenses and to look at *Spirited Away* through these. However, before summing up the analytical results I would like to say a few words about my own personal journey through this Wonderland. This project has taught me how difficult, not to say impossible, it is to abandon anthropocentric perspectives. While I cannot step out of this human body/mind assemblage that I refer to as 'I', I can reflect on the many ways in which I reproduce my assumptions. Analysing this complex film and plunging into posthumanist materialist theories gave me an opportunity to do so. At times, when my human-centred thought patterns became too dominant, reminding myself of the material conditions and connections that have shaped this thesis project, helped me bring myself back on track. Thesis writing, although a rather brainy activity, is also a material and physical occupation that requires interconnectedness with many kinds of matter. The configurations between human body and technology are often precarious; a recent hard disk crash reminded me in a brutal way of my vulnerability in the encounters with technological Others. However, I feel grateful to the many chocolate éclairs and cups of coffee that have nourished my body and mind and thereby also the writing.

In this study I have discussed some dichotomies and shown the permeability of the boundaries between the terms, such as human and non-human, matter and spirit, materiality and language. *Spirited Away* depicts a world that, despite being (nearly) void of humans, is not without hierarchies and problematic power relations. While not at all providing examples of a utopia, the upheaval of the laws that we know from our human world might suggest other ways of looking. Humans have very little value; they matter only as work force (as in the case of Chihiro) or food (for example the parents).

In the magical bathhouse shown in the film, magic becomes closely linked to both life and agency. Magic is a force used by the powerful beings in the bathhouse, mainly Yubaba, in order to control the subjects. However, magic is a force that cannot be totally controlled by a being and is also open for inputs from others. Thus, magic kind of glues these assemblages together. Agency is not firmly anchored in an autonomous entity, but rather a force that
traverses matter.; by animating matter and making objects move and talk, magic questions humanist notions of life and agency. A relational view of life implies that, rather than being posited in a binary as the opposite of death, life can be seen in terms of forces that move around, in and out of assemblages. Life is, however, not necessarily the birth right of the individual, as shown by the low status of the animated soot balls working in the boiler room. The capacity for agency reflects power relationships.

I have given a lot of attention to the importance and possible interpretations of food in the film. Eating can be regarded as an intra-action between human and non-human, or between animate and inanimate matter. Food is part of the material-discursive practices that negotiates the processes of exclusion and assimilation into the community. The question of who is eating who is also a starting point for understanding the often implicit hierarchies. This is a world where there is no human essence; the humans are demoted to comestible matter with no value beyond their flesh. Being eaten seems to be a possible punishment for transgressing the community rules or the result of not being considered worthy of being a member of the community.

I have argued for a reading of bodies as polymorphic, i.e. with the capacity to change between different forms. With the help of monster theory, I have discussed how the morphological diversity reveals the impossibility of clearly demarcating categories and boundaries between Self and Other. As I have touched upon in several parts of this analysis, embodiment does not allow for easy separation between inside and outside. Being embodied implies interconnections and identity is relational rather than a matter of essence (whether human or non-human). The monstrous - that which fails to live up to the norms of corporeality - undermines the idea that the Self is an autonomous being with clear boundaries and thereby it serves to question the relations between Self and Other.
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