Mythorealism in the Films of Mamoru Hosoda

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Submitted to the Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies in candidacy for the

BA (hons) Degree in Animation DL832

Submitted March 2026

Word Count: 8784

Declaration of Originality

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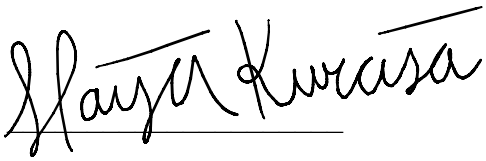

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Acknowledgements

I would like to give my sincerest thanks and most genuine gratitude to my thesis supervisor Dr. Sarah Hoover for her consistent care, aid and guidance. Without her oversight and encouragement this thesis would have hardly come to fruition and my love for film studies would have died.

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Connerty for overseeing all my past writing endeavours and imparting a love of film analysis that will never leave me. Your enthusiasm will forever be a highlight of my time here in IADT.

Finally I would like to thank my mother Agita for introducing me to film and unconditionally believing in me, my best friend Tii Lomo for always picking up my calls, Fiona Mills and Leah Giersch for spending hours in the library with me and my course mates for always sharing their knowledge, making me laugh and giving me hope for the future.

As much as this is my own writing it could not exist without the continuous support of all the people throughout my life that have made me who I am. Without you all the sun would not shine as bright.

Thank you.

Abstract

This thesis explores the potential symbiotic relationship Yan Lianke's literary theory of mythorealism can have with animation through an in depth analysis of the films *Wolf Children (2012)* and *The Boy and the Beast (2015)* directed by Mamoru Hosoda.

This research proposes that animation and mythorealism share core principles that encourage the willing suspension of disbelief within audiences and turn the unbelievable into the believable. In the modern day there is an ever growing need for new avenues through which to communicate the complexity of the human experience. Mythorealistic animation produces a fresh perspective on the relationship between reality and unreality and through the deliberate balancing of juxtaposed cognitive forces forms a language of expression beyond literal representation or total abstraction.

This thesis adapts Yan Lianke's mythorealism, a literary framework, for a discussion of animated film. Then it employs a methodology based on Warren Buckland's cognitive semiotics of film, specifically an audience's intuitions of filmic space to break down instances of mythorealism within the Hosoda films. This research method applies a developed framework of image schemas to construct an analysis of the sequencing of animated films, arguing that this sequencing, speaks strongly to audiences' semiotic reading of the scene, and furthers the illusion of life. It outlines effective communication of the emotional truths within the characters' reality, the greater themes of the film and a further endearment to supernatural situations and characters with the goal of connecting and representing the audience's lived experiences through unreality.

The results of this thesis suggest that animation as a medium can embody the ideals of mythorealism with minor adaptation and that the intersection of mythorealism and animation deepens how animation is understood by audiences.

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Introduction

Narratives hold power. They hold communities, cultures, histories, lessons, traditions, warnings and memories, anything that can be experienced, imagined or felt has the potential to be communicated through narrative. In this thesis I will be adapting and applying Yan Lianke's literary theory of mythorealism to the animated films of Mamoru Hosoda. I will explore the symbiotic relationship animation as a medium can have with mythorealism and how this interaction encourages the core principles of both creating a unique avenue through which to communicate a variety of complex emotions by embracing the duality of reality. As Yan writes, *"Mythorealism does not definitely reject reality; it attempts to create reality and surpass realism."* [1]

So too do the animated films of Mamoru Hosoda and animation in general aim to create reality, through the illusion of life. They formulate a believable unreality, one that can reach beyond literal experience to communicate the abstract emotional inner reality of being human enough to transcend barriers of language through the universality of feeling.

To demonstrate this I will first be contextualizing mythorealistic animation through a series of definitional explorations that create the bases of knowledge necessary for analysis of Hosoda's films as mythorealism. I begin with an in depth breakdown of what constitutes mythorealism. I look at myths' influence on mythorealism as a core component and explore how mythorealism manifests as a form of modern mythology and narrative offspring of myth, intrinsically linked to an

[1] Yan Lianke, *Discovering Fiction*, trans. Carlos Rojas (Duke University press, London, 2022), 99.

expression of humanity's unwavering search for answers to unanswerable questions. This leads to Yan's criteria for mythorealism and the way in which it exists by balancing juxtaposing forces. I will also contribute to the scholarly conversation by discussing the adaptations necessary to these criteria for an analysis of animated film to take place.

Chapter two will explore how mythorealism can function within animation by incorporating animation and film theory. The chapter examines the suspension of disbelief as an integral facet of an audience's understanding of mythorealistic animation. It uses the example of the uncanny valley to justify these claims and likens animations' illusion of life to that of mythorealisms relationship to reality. With the ultimate goal is encouraging an awareness of the way in which the core aspects of animation and mythorealism mirror each other.

After which I will consolidate my claims by engaging in a visual analysis of scenes from two Mamoru Hosoda films *"Wolf Children" (2012)* and *"The Boy and the Beast" (2015)* through the lens of mythorealism. I will integrate Warren Buckland's conceptions of filmic space in order to draw inferences about how these sequences create meaning that can be understood, further the believability of mythorealism and creatively communicate the depth of the human experience. Successfully building a relationship between the audience and the supernatural without sacrificing the emotional resonance one might experience with the humanistic themes present in the film's narrative focus. It by finding a truth beyond truth creates a reality more representative of reality and brings audiences together. As Yan writes,

> *"...the objective of mythorealism is not merely to attain a deeper understanding of a complicated and absurd deep reality (of which history is simply one form). Nor is it simply to analyze a more complicated and absurd*

human existence. Instead, mythorealism, like reality, seeks to view people and the world as a single, indivisible whole." [2]

[2] Yan, *Discovering Fiction*, 115.

Chapter One: The Context of Mythorealism

Myth

"Human beings have always been mythmakers" [3] It is generally agreed upon that most communities around the world participate in some form of mythmaking. Though the concrete criteria of what defines myth beyond it being simply a narrative form of storytelling is somewhat pliable it is difficult to deny that myth is powerful. It encapsulates and conveys multitudes. For as long as people have wondered about themselves, their world and their place in it, they have explored the abstract state of conscious being through myth.

Author Joseph Campbell in his book *"Occidental Mythology"* prescribes to myth four criteria that I will summarise as:

1. Creating a sense of awe surrounding the greater question of existence.
2. Crafting a view of the world from real human experience corresponding to the folk beliefs relevant to its creation that support the existence of a mystery of life.
3. Having the role of integrating people as social members and participants of their culture.
4. Allowing the opportunity to explore the self, with the aim of further self-realization.[4]

However compelling this list of criteria is, Campbell is not the sole authority on the matter of myth. Neither is all myth homogeneous. To accept any set of criteria one

[3] Karen Armstrong. *A Short History of Myth* (Canongate Books Ltd, 2008) 1. https://ia801900.us.archive.org/22/items/KarenArmstrongAShortHistoryOfMyth/Karen%20Armstrong%20A%20Short%20History%20of%20Myth.pdf

[4] Joseph Campbell. *The Masks Of God: Occidental Mythology*, (London, Secker and Walburg,1965) 519-521. https://ignca.gov.in/Asi_data/42421.pdf

must also be able to accept that due to differences in cultural heritage there are undoubtedly outliers that do not fit neatly into any specific definition.

It can be argued that Joseph Campbell's work in comparative mythology has aged poorly particularly how Campbell's condenses non-western myth to fit within western viewpoints therefore misrepresenting the cultures these myths originate from. I am inclined to agree with such criticisms however, this specific set of criteria expresses an understanding of myths inherent link to a cultural origin leading me to endorse this perspective as having academic value in this discussion.

For comparison Karen Armstrong in *"A Short History of Myth"* prescribes five criteria through which myth can be defined that I will summarise as:

1. A fascination or inclusion of some form of death or fear.
2. A relevance to a particular cultural ritual from which the myth might be derived.
3. An exploration of some extreme beyond human comfort.
4. A lesson or deeper meaning that can be gleaned from an experience of the myth.
5. A preoccupation with a high regard for a spiritual force or plane of existence greater and beyond that of the physical human world.[5]

It is possible to draw parallels between both lists through recurrent themes of humanity, societal integration and larger questions surrounding of existence and purpose. Author Leszek Kolakowski in speaking on myth writes that:

[5] Armstrong, A Short History Of Myth, 5-7.

"It attempts to express what is universal in an unrepeatable singularity of a mythical occurrence." [6]

Myth exists all around us and the effects of its influence even in the modern day can be felt by most. It, even in its most basic form bridges an essential boundary between the concept of man and something which is beyond us be it a physical experience, a supernatural experience or a spiritual one. It can function as a socially unifying force, an exploration, a question, and maybe for some an answer. Kolakowski continues to describes myths very existence as, *"An attempt to convey what cannot be literally conveyed"*

Some academics argue that because the use of myth within modern society has changed that myth has ostensibly died. Sophia Heller proposes *in "The Absence of Myth"* that , *"In modernity myth itself has left very little to believe in. What we have inherited are concepts and imaginings of myth, as opposed to the concrete, living experience of myth."* [7]

Though I disagree with the overall sentiments surrounding the death of myth, Heller makes a compelling case for how the difference in function between myth and the supposed modern myth means that it can be looked at as distinct from each-other . It is therefore that a need and the very existence of mythorealism arises, a way in which to refer to a new kind of mythmaking derived from myth and created to speak to the modern person. Heller goes on to argue through the example *of "The Lord of The Rings" (2001)* film that

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[6] Leszek Kolakowski. The Presence Of Myth, (University of Chicago Press, 1989) 131.

[7] Sophia Heller, *The Absence of Myth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 1. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3407601&c=UERG&ppg=1

"Hobbits might show us the values of humility and courage, but presumably what we internalize are the values, not the Hobbits themselves." [8]

A statement that produces a concept that is diametrically opposed to the richness that can be found in mythorealism. Yes, what an audience member might internalise from the film are the values of humility and courage. However, those values do not discount the importance of the hobbits as the avenue through which the values are communicated. Their supernatural existence contributes to the strength of the message.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan proposes that "*The medium is the message.*" [9] Mythorealism embraces the messenger as part of the message. Using the example of the hobbits being fantastical creatures allows them to further the meaning by being it, they are the values they espouse in a manifested physical form. Themes do not need to be dealt with within a mythorealistic way, but as will be discussed in chapter two doing so lends them a gravity that is hard to look away from. The draw for some may be in part spectacle, but it is not spectacle without substance. The substance, through mythorealism, transforms spectacle into a sublime normal, a bizarre form of hyper mediocrity that appeals to the humanity of the viewer. *"By redefining the boundaries of the rational world, mythorealism finds a new entry point to understanding humanity, reality, and the world"* [10]

It is difficult to argue mythorealism's autonomy as an aspect within animation and area full of potential for analysis without discussing the ways in which mythorealism, as a relatively modern categorization, epitomises a search for meaning

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[8] Heller, *The Absence of Myth*, 2.

[9] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 1.

[10] Xie Haiyan, *Mythorealism as Method: Ideology and Form in Yan Lianke's Fiction* (PhD diss. University of Alberta, 2019), 293. https://ualberta.scholaris.ca/items/9d73bad0-23c1-4b02-b086-46563314ff1a

that reflects in some way a desperate want for an accurately representative modern mythology.

It is clear to see that as time has progressed, the old questions of myth have persisted in the minds of people, as such there is a growing need for those same age-old questions to be speculated on by the people of now, in the mediums of now.

The sheer variety of myth, as discussed previously leads it to be somewhat amorphous but it is always created by human beings for other human beings, in that way it appeals to the needs of the people of the time while also appealing to any number of timeless, universal and generally unanswerable questions. As William K Ferrell writes, *"They (myths) are stories that attempt to provide an understanding of the real world at the time they are conceived."* [11]

Mythorealism reflects the needs of our world now. As the world has progressively become more complicated so too have the questions we ask of myth become more specific and the answers more abstract. Thus the modern myth adjacent conception is born.

Mythorealism

Mythorealism is a relatively recent term coined by Chinese author Yan Lianke in his 2011 book *"Discovering Fiction"* and what I believe to be a natural evolution and significant addition to a classical understanding of both myth and realism for the modern day. Yan Lianke originally conceived the term to describe his own approach to writing. He described it as: *"...a creative process that rejects the superficial*

[11] William K Ferrell, *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 5. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=282771&c=UERG&ppg=1

logical relations that exist in real life to explore a kind of invisible and "nonexistent" truth—a truth that is obscured by truth itself. [12]

Mythorealism draws inspiration from both myth and realist tradition of literature. It is a balancing of opposing forces. What warrants mythorealism being a distinct form from both myth and realism is the treatment of its aspects and the interplay between these elements within the narrative. Myth has the capacity to reflect reality as does realism have the capacity to include the supernatural. Mythorealism enjoys a shameless integration of both simultaneously. In practice Yan's mythorealism manifests as four main aspects,

1. "Minjan" influences from Chinese folklore that are integrated into the rationality of the narrative.
2. Some form of supernatural phenomenon, spiritual or religious.
3. An importance placed on imagination, manifesting as either humour, irony, exaggeration or satire.
4. A focus on humanity. [13]

These aspects inform and create Yan's particular style of storytelling, the effect of which is notably powerful. I believe that Yan Lianke's vision of mythorealism has greater implications and further use cases beyond literature. Particularly in animation where films frequently and easily push the boundaries of both the real and unreal.

By balancing and grounding the grandeur and supernaturality of myth with the honesty and grit of realism. Mythorealism, the sum of two parts, plays to the strengths

[12] Yan, *Discovering Fiction*, 99.
[13] Xie Haiyan, "Mythorealism as Method: Ideology and Form in Yan Lianke's Fiction" (PhD diss. University of Alberta, 2019) 293-299. https://ualberta.scholaris.ca/items/9d73bad0-23c1-4b02-b086-46563314ff1a

of its origin and finds a new means by which to communicate meaning, especially within animation where a visual expression of this is near limitless. The combination of a momentarily believable unbelievability alongside a literal (visual) representation of something metaphysical gives an audience a more creative way into the minds of the characters, the world or the themes of the film. Turning the unbelievable into something more palatable and even relatable.

William K. Ferrell in his book *"Literature and Film as Modern Mythology"* off handedly describes myth as a child of religion.[14] Similarly, there is a parallel to be drawn with mythorealism being a child of myth and in many ways the next stage of a storytelling lineage.

However, to use the aspects of mythorealism as a lens through which to discuss animated film some adaptation is necessary. Detaching the original aspect of "minjan" from its specific root in Chinese folklore and literature allows for mythorealism to entertain a larger variety of media for analysis. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be adapting the aspect of "minjan" and referring to it simply as a rational integration of the supernatural within the narrative, and in doing so not referring to it in further discussion under the title of "minjan." By acknowledging the way in which I warp the meaning I hope to respect mythorealism's original connection to Chinese folklore and recognise Yan Lianke as the source and originator without diminishing the potential value mythorealism can have in discussions of multicultural forms of media.

[14] Ferrell, *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology*, 5.

Chapter Two:

The Willing Suspension of Disbelief and Mythorealistic Animation

The Willing Suspension of Disbelief

To discuss the intersection of mythorealism and animation it is essential to understand the bounds of unreality that animation usually exists within, specifically 2D hand drawn animation as will be seen in the films being analysed. Unlike live action, 2D animation is undoubtedly unreal, it is in its very simplest terms the illusion of life. Therefore the threshold for its believability must exist on a separate scale to that of live action and even when it is depicting actions that are real and mundane because of the artistic element it, like mythorealism, can be described as an, *"unconventional representation of reality."* [15]An audience's experience of animation therefore depends greatly on the willing suspension of disbelief.

The willing suspension of disbelief is a term coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to describe a form of poetic faith originally used to differentiate between his and William Wordsworth's writing. It draws into focus questions surrounding the value of reality within poetry. Coleridge writes: *"...my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."* [16]

Here Coleridge asserts that the relationship between the supernatural, the romantic and reality is more dependent on an audience's momentary willingness to

[15] Xie, *Mythorealism as Method*. 293.
[16] Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria*, (Project Gutenberg, 2004) Chap. 14. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm#link2HCH0014

disregard the impossibility of what they are experiencing, in favour of participating in the medium.

The relevance of Coleridge's literary theory is as fundamental to mythorealism as it is to animation. The willing suspension of disbelief is the unspoken contract of believability that film creates with the audience. "*A human interest and a semblance of truth*" [17] is the foundation of how both animation and mythorealism rationally integrate that which is beyond human and get away with it.

Despite the way in which the phrase *"willing suspension of disbelief"* has changed in the modern day to refer to how: *"...the audience creates an emotional attachment to a fictional narrative so much so that they react to events and characters as if they themselves are living in the story."* [18]

Which functionally represents more of an extreme form of empathy rather than true poetic faith. This the effect is undeniable, as Julian Young writes in *"A Philosophy of Tragedy."*

"When we open a book or go to the theatre, we want to forget that we are in the presence of fiction. And that, from childhood onwards, is what we do – effortlessly" [19]

This manifestation of poetic faith is practiced by human beings persistently. When one sits down to view any film, animated or otherwise, a decision made either consciously or unconsciously by the audience to participate in the experience being offered, and forget that what they are viewing is an illusion.

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[17] Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria*. Chap. 14.

[18] Suspension of disbelief. A Dictionary of Media and Communication. (Oxford, December, 2024) https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100544310

[19] Julian Young. *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Zizek,* (Cambridge University Press, 2013.) 46
http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1182954

The phenomenon exists for both live action and animated films however it is the very nature of 2D animation's blatant unreality that makes it reliant on a more extreme form of the willing suspension of disbelief. This can be seen as either a great weakness or a great strength. If an audience is already willing to entertain the unreality of animation then they are placed in a position where, given the correct encouragement from the film, there lies the potential to accept further unreality within the narrative of the animated film making animation a great conduit for mythorealism.

However, it cannot be assumed that an audience will accept anything and everything. The suspension of disbelief within mythorealistic animation relies on a carefully crafted internal logic based in a form of consistency within the supernatural elements which constitutes the mythorealistic principle of rational integration. When supernatural elements are not integrated sufficiently or the fictional worlds they occupy are too similar to that of the audiences the suspension of disbelief can wane breaking the illusion.

One could go as far as to say that intentionally creating distance between the internal elements of the film and an audience's lived reality can work in favour of communicating complicated themes. As Irving Singer writes on the topic film,

"This distancing puts the spectators of the finished product into a receptive attitude toward narratives that are unlike life itself precisely because they are mythic or include mythic aspects" [20]

The positive effect of this distance can be somewhat explored through its inverse and negative counterpart the uncanny valley, a term originally coined by roboticist Masahiro Mori to describe an aversion people have toward robots intended

[20] Irving Singer, *Cinematic Mythmaking : Philosophy in Film* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 10. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3338946&c=UERG&ppg=1

to be humanlike. This concept can and often does apply to animated film as well as robotics**.** Lisa Bode writes in *"The Animation Studies Reader"*

"...animated figures that aim for lifelike photorealism tend to strike us as vaguely unpleasant or not fully 'alive', and largely these are tied to 'the uncanny valley' hypothesis." [21]

Any animated film reaching for a truthful and accurate realism would have to contend with the rules of our reality, rather than the rules of an animated unreality and therefore be subject to the phenomenon of the uncanny valley. Mythorealism in aiming to create its own reality circumvents this phenomenon. The truth beyond truth toward which mythorealism aims produces a necessary and beneficial distance from any lived reality, allowing for the freedom to explore the unreal fearlessly. The direct acknowledgment of the supernatural by characters within diegesis as rational creates a dialogue with the audience that encourages belief, modeled off the characters diegetic behaviour.

Mythorealistic Animation

Mythorealism does not exist without human centric stories. Humanity is a core aspect of mythorealism and an essential grounding factor. Humanity is not essential to all forms of animation making this one of the distinguishing characteristics of mythorealistic animation. The animated supernatural within mythorealistic animation exists to further explore the human condition. This central grounding is what prevents the mythorealistic from losing its purpose.

[21] Lisa Bode, *The Animation Studies Reader*, edited by Nichola Dobson, et al. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 59. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6933967.

Yan Lianke's work in many ways rejects Chinese nationalism but neither does it promote individualism, rather it turns its face toward the local [22] and by telling meaningful stories that occur at a smaller scale he finds connection with regular people who might see themselves and their experiences represented as never before through the supernatural in a way that evocatively and effectively communicates the most human of sentiments.

This I propose is the final effect of successful mythorealistic animation where all its aspects are in the right places to create something so perfectly unbelievable that it connects to a true reality. The illusion of life beyond just life.

One of narrative animation's accomplishments has to do with creating and improving upon the idea of the illusion of life, which a lot of animators attribute to being crucial to the success of the films that they make. In many ways those involved in the early productions like *"Snow White" (1937)* can be seen as the pioneers of the medium, in that the approach they were taking to animation as performance set them apart from other studios at the time. For them convincing the audience of the life present in a character, no matter how supernatural, was achievable through grounding the absurd and unreal in something recognisable and by crafting stories that bridge the gap between audience and animation. As Mark Davis puts in an interview for the book *"Working with Disney"*,

> *"Disney still had this one thing of developing character and bringing it to life, making you believe that this situation was real. It's so remarkable to have progressed from 1928 and a Steamboat Willie who just jumped up and down*

[22] Xie, *Mythorealism as Method.* 288.

and squeaked to the brilliant Snow White, where you believed that these things came to life." [23]

However, it is not just the titular heroine who seems real in the film but also each of the dwarfs, the animals and even the evil mirror.

Animation makes its bed in the unreal, at its most creative it delights in depicting that which does not and could not exist. However, when animation aims to do more than delight and instead connect, it seeks to reference reality. The illusion of life is a careful and specific performance dependent on the audience's willing acceptance and participation in the artform. When animation strays too far into the real it elicits the uncanny valley; when it wanders into the totally surreal, its appeal to many falters.

There is a sweet spot for animation, one which allows for the beauty, creativity and freedom of the artform to coexist with reality. When working with the principles of mythorealism, animation can create an effect that leads to the vivid and emotionally resonant animated films I will be analysing in the next chapter.

[23] Don Peri. *Working with Disney : Interviews with Animators, Producers, and Artists*, (University Press of Mississippi, 2011.) http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=683913

Chapter Three: Methodology

I argue that mythorealistic animation builds a relationship with the audience that encourages the believability of the supernatural elements in order to communicate a depth of human emotion. To explore this, I used an adaptation of Yan's criteria for mythorealism as introduced in chapter one and selected two animated films directed by Hosoda to analyse: *"Wolf Children"* and *"The Boy And The Beast"*

Hosoda's approach to narrative storytelling bears similarities to that of Yan, as will be discussed in chapter three. The majority of his discography meets the criteria necessary for mythorealism by balancing the juxtaposing forces that constitute mythorealism. The films are chosen to represent two different treatments of mythorealism: one where the supernatural is integrated into a human world and another where the human is integrated into a supernatural world. Both films display a humanistic approach with strong emotional cores that ground the narrative, making them a good basis for analysis with optimal scope.

Two scenes from each film stand out as exemplars of this narrative grounding. To closely read these scenes I will break them into sequences of images that represent individual camera cuts. Then analysing the visual elements present within the individual shots as well as the relationships between the sequences of shots, with a focus on the information received by the audience.

The exploration of shot relationships and audience is furthered through ideas drawn from Buckland's *"Cognitive Semiotics of Film."* His conceptions of filmic space allow us to make inferences of meaning and intention through the projection of different image schemas. The schemas are based on George Lakoff's structures of abstract conceptual thought. In particular the cause-and-effect schema which refers to how actions produce consequences The in-out schema, based on conceptions of an

interior, a boundary and an exterior. The link schema, based on an awareness of position relative to another. The source-path-goal schema, based on an experience of movement in a particular direction and the part-whole schema, based on an understanding of our bodies as a whole made of parts. [24] Buckland's methodology suggests that we can analyse how films are understood by audiences if we imagine an ambiguous "*ideal film spectator."*

"Cognitive film semiotics therefore strives to describe the filmic intuitions of the ideal film spectator, to characterize what a film spectator knows when she is able to understand a film." [25] Mythorealistic elements can be subjected to the same treatment, with cognitive semiotics justifying an analysis of the film spectator's intuition. In other words what becomes known as one understands and is able to accept (the willing suspension of disbelief) the shameless unreality present. Cognitive film semiotics treatment of film as a language of images allows for mythorealism as a literary theory to be reasonably applied to an analysis of film.

However, there are limitations to this methodological approach. There is a western writer's bias missing nuances that could be gleaned from a more in-depth look at the Chinese literary culture originating mythorealism. Similarly, a deeper understanding of Japanese animation would produce closer cultural links in the analysis.

The basis of my adaptation of Buckland's approach centers a single chapter of theory within his writing which limits the extent of the analysis but allows me to appropriately focus on the analysis; this was done consciously in order to give an appropriate level of attention and focus to the analysis.

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[24] Warren Buckland, The Cognitive Semiotics of Film, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 42-44, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/iadt-ebooks/detail.action?docID=202241.
[25] Buckland, The Cognitive Semiotics of Film, 34.

Despite these shortcomings this methodology creates a repeatable framework and supports a unique avenue of discussion for animated film. It enables the theories I have introduced to interact with each other and produce a substantial and new understanding of how film is cognitively engaged by its audience.

Chapter Four: Film Analysis

Mamoru Hosoda: A Humanistic Approach

Mamoru Hosoda's filmography, much like Yan Lianke's writing, often displays a humanistic approach to storytelling, always striving to find a creative way to communicate various forms of the human experience. Hosoda displays a sincere interest in people, their daily lives, their regular routines and their mundane problems. In an early school project, he remarked that the intention of his work was to paint, *"Lived in spaces where people breathe life into places"* [26]

A sentiment that has managed to persist within his films. His work exhibits an unmistakable appreciation for the regularity of life, one that he has crafted into the very fabric of his visual and narrative worlds. This exists both in juxtaposition to and in simultaneously cohesion with the supernatural, the bizarre and the ridiculous. Film producer Don Hanhn once said in regard to Hosoda's work that, *"He and his collaborators tell stories that are remarkably human, given his penchant for setting them in mind-bending worlds that threaten humanity."* [27]

In some ways it can be said that Hosoda's inclinations towards both human stories and mind-bending worlds have led him to similar conclusions as Yan Lianke without the exact wording to directly link them. By taking the emotional, spiritual, philosophical musings contained within everyday life, transforming them into visual representations, and communicating them through animation Hosoda creates the mythorealistic. He invites the audience into the unquestionable unreality of animation so that they might find within it something that is real.

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[26] Charles Solomon, *The Man Who Leapt Through Time* (Abrams. 2022), 10.
[27] Solomon, *The Man Who Leapt Through Time*, 7.

Hosoda's mythorealism seeks to communicate that which is notoriously intangible, grief, strength, love, belonging, isolation, family, hope, and any number of quintessential human emotions. In his animated films these concepts are free to take the forms of anything ranging from human wolf hybrids *(Wolf Children)* to swimming urban whales *(The Boy and the Beast)* allowing the medium of animation to play to the strengths of mythorealism.

Just as in Yan Lianke's mythorealistic literature, his imaginative prose manages to comment on and communicate the breakdown of a rural historical Chinese society due to HIV/Aids through the use of a supernatural ghost narrator in *"Dream of Ding Village"* [28]. Hosoda is able to communicate the difficulties of single motherhood through visually depicting children that are both human and wolf in *"Wolf Children."*

Though the specificity of the topics that both Yan and Hosoda tackle are noticeably different and contextually derive from different places the parallels between both of their approaches to storytelling are clear. Both have found a common ground through their desires to connect audiences to an experience of reality beyond reality, mythoreality.

Wolf Children

"Wolf Children" directed by Mamoru Hosoda and written in collaboration with Satoko Okudera is a film that speaks to experiences of both motherhood and growing up.

[28] Yan Lianke, *Dream of Ding Village*, trans. Cindy Carter (Grove Press, 2011).

It is in equal parts as charming as it is heartbreaking in its honest portrayal of the struggles and triumphs of family life. A life that happens to revolve around two children that are half wolf, on their fathers' side.

"Wolf Children" was chosen as a case study due to it meeting this thesis' adapted criteria for mythorealism. The film includes a supernatural phenomenon in the form of the wolf man and his and Hana's children, Yuki and Ame. This is integrated into the rationality of the world as the lived reality of Hana's family. Where both children must hide their true selves in fear of repercussions from the urban and rural human worlds. The film creatively and imaginatively uses Yuki and Ame's duality as human wolves to exaggerate their emotional experiences of childhood, as will be elaborated on during the scene analysis. The film also has a distinct focus on humanity manifesting in the genuine familial love between Hana, Yuki and Ame and their individual journeys of growth.

In the book *"The Man Who Leapt Through Film"* by Charles Solomon, writes that for Hosoda the film was intended to be a tribute of gratitude to his late mother.[29] The sincerity of Hosoda's intent is reflected in the authenticity of his portrayals of both parenthood and childhood.

Furthermore, Hosoda's connection to and ownership over this film makes it strong grounds for a discussion of his mythorealistic filmmaking, more so than a film such as *"Digimon: The Movie" (2000)* might, which was also directed by Hosoda but made for the existing IP Digimon and under the Toei animation company. *"Wolf Children"* marked a significant change within Hosoda's career as it prompted the founding of his and Yuichiro Saito's *"Studio Chizu."* An animation studio created for the sole purpose of completing this film the context of which contributes to an

[29] Solomon, *The Man Who Leapt Through Time,* 105.

understanding of the creative and directorial freedom Hosoda experienced that led to the production of this film, ultimately creating a formidable example of mythorealism.

Scene 1: The Wolf Death

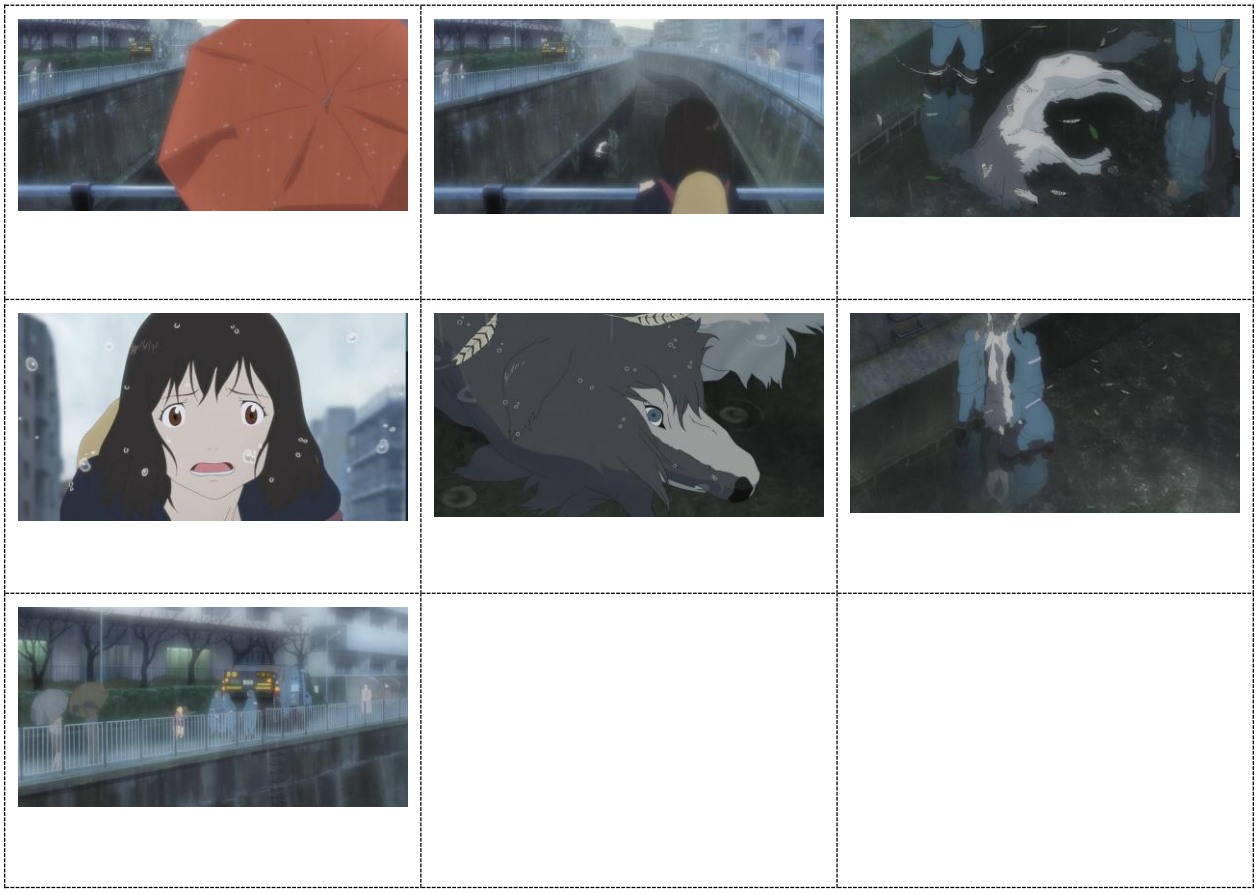

Figure 1. Image sequence from "Wolf Children" separated by cuts within the edit. Hosoda, Mamoru, dir., Wolf Children, (2012, Studio Chizu, Funimation, 2013), DVD.

Selected scene one is a turning point in the narrative of the film and in many ways the inciting incident to Hana's journey. This scene meets the criteria for mythorealism by including a supernatural occurrence in the form of the wolf man rationalized in the world as a him being a mortal being interacted with by the background characters, the scene displays a humanistic approach by centering Hana's

experience of the incident using an imaginative framing to exaggerate Hana's emotions.

Edited in sequence the audience is shown Hana's back and umbrella as she is looking out at something obscured. The umbrella is dropped revealing what Hana is looking at, an animal lifelessly floating in a drainage ditch being discussed by three maintenance workers. The audience is shown a closer image of the animal's body with its eye obscured, as it floats, lifeless. This is followed by a close up of Hana's face as she reacts to the scene in front of her. Then a still close up of the wolf's face with a single blue and open eye. After which the camera resumes a medium distanced position as the maintenance workers unceremoniously shove the wolf in a disposal bag. The scene then ends with a wide shot of the street as Hana runs to confront the maintenance workers while the wolf is thrown into the garbage truck and driven away, leaving Hana.

The composition and order of the shots create a conception of filmic space that contributes to an audience's understanding of the emotional experience that Hana goes through. This both furthers the believability of the supernatural within the continuity of the film while using the strengths of mythorealism to describe the indescribable.

Warren Buckland in *"The Cognitive Semiotics of Film"* quotes George Lakoff's theory of experientialism arguing that film uses similar process of reasoning as language, in that one is able to *"form complex concepts by projecting several image schemata into the conceptual domain"* [30]

In this vein of reasoning *"Wolf Children"* displays a use of filmic space that employs the *in-out schema* to show the audience the world through Hana's eyes and

[30] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 44.

the *link schema* [31] to further an audience's connection to Hana based on an preexisting understanding of the supernatural phenomenon within this world that is the wolf man, constituting shared information with Hana.

Within the construction of the scene the stationary camera frame brings the audience into the mind and emotions of Hana by literally increasing the distance shot by shot. The first two shots place the audience on Hana's side, hovering behind her, looking over her shoulder. Based on this placement it can be inferred that the third shot is what Hana is looking at. The fourth shot shows her reaction to what she and by proxy the audience is looking at. The fifth shot reveals what Hana and the audience knows to be true, the wolf is dead. Buckland writes *"a subjective (or focalized) shot is comprehended as embodied – as representing the vision of a character existing in the diegesis."* [32]

The framing, the context and the previously given suspension of disbelief contribute to a specific comprehension of the scene. When the still of the wolf eye is shown what the audience sees is no longer the wolf but the wolf as Hana knows him, the wolf man. It is then that the audience becomes absorbed within the diegetic reality of the film and shares with Hana the moment of her partner's death and the emotional turmoil that is her indescribable grief.

Shot six breaks the spell, the maintenance worker's apathetic treatment of the wolf body puts into perspective both Hana and the audience's unique position. Within her world Hana is completely alone in her grief, neither the onlookers nor the maintenance workers are aware of what has occurred, it is only the audience that understands the truth.

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[31] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 42-44.
[32] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 49.

The choice to show the death of Hana's partner as the death of a wolf rather than the death of a man allows for the supernatural element of mythorealism to exaggerate an experience of loss. This added layer of complexity highlights Hana's all-consuming isolation. Rather than depicting a literal experience of losing a human loved one the scene carries with it a new non-literal weight, it encompasses the feeling of having no-one to understand your pain, a layer beyond that of a singular grief.

Scene 2: Children's hospital or animal hospital

Figure 2. Image sequence from "Wolf Children" separated by cuts within the edit

Hosoda, Mamoru, dir., Wolf Children, (2012, Studio Chizu, Funimation, 2013), DVD.

Selected scene two occurs within a montage of Hana's life raising two very young wolf children alone. This meets the criteria for mythorealism through the supernatural occurrence of the wolf children rationalized into the fictional world as

beings whose true identities must remain hidden. The scene applies a humanistic approach through focusing on the relatable experience of Hana's confusion and it employs an imaginative focus to derive humour from the supernatural.

In sequence the audience is shown Yuki as a wolf sick on the floor next to the remnants of an unidentified packet. Then Hana running towards the camera with Yuki in her arms frantically looking left and right. Next there is a still of a children's hospital that swipes into a still of an animal hospital. This cuts to a wide shot of Hana at the intersection between the children's and animal hospital. Followed by Hana in distress talking on the pay phone with the children's hospital framed in the background. Then Hana in less distress talking on the pay phone with the animal hospital framed in the background. Finally, the scene ends with a shot of Yuk as a human asking for a snack and a shot of Hana's relief as she pulls her daughter in for a hug.

The composition and order of these shots create in the audience a conception of filmic space that both builds tension and derives humor from its use of the supernatural. Highlighting mythorealism's ability to make more palatable situations that would otherwise be appalling.

Buckland writes that *"narrative trajectories can be understood in terms of the source-path-goal schema"* [33] Understanding of any narrative can also be broken down through the conception of relations between cause and effect. This scene is a microcosm within the greater path of the narrative film, structurally containing three acts.

[33] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 42-44.

Shot one sets up the occurrence, the cause is Yuki ingesting something as a wolf the effect is that this has made her ill. Shot two furthers this by building tension. It displays Hana's panic which is an effect of Yuki's illness.

Shots three, four, and five are the punchline, one that can only exist within the rational irrationality of the film's fiction, as Hana stresses over whether to bring her daughter to a children's hospital or an animal hospital being caught in a literal crossroads as well as a metaphorical one. This is ultimately being proposed as the logical effect of Yuki being simultaneously wolf and human. Deriving comedy from Yuki's supernatural existence while using Yuki's position as a human child to build tension.

Finally, the resolution is presented in shots six through nine as Hana calls both hospitals, reinforcing the internal logic of simultaneous human/wolf existence and by proxy the believability of both this world and scenario. Buckland writes on the topic that *"Failure to construct a coherent space will be due to ill-defined constraints (either an insufficient number or contradictory constraints)"* [34]

The consistency of Yuki's supernatural dual existence allows the audience to both laugh at the ridiculousness of the overall scene while being placed in a position to further empathise with Hana's struggles as a single mother.

"Wolf Children" as an instance of mythorealism in order to ground itself and sustain the audience's faith is constantly and consistently reinforcing its internal rationality. Building the constraints of the world and story then communicating them effectively to the audience who throughout the duration of the film use this knowledge to derive emotional depth and conceptualise the emotions more abstractly.

[34] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 36.

The Boy and the Beast

"The Boy and the Beast" written and directed by Mamoru Hosoda is a film that very effectively employs mythorealism to communicate themes of sincerity, family, strength and finding one's place in the world. While also differing from *"Wolf Children"* by being an escalation of the supernatural elements comparatively.

The film easily meets the adapted criteria of mythorealism but uses it in a way that is distinctly opposite to that of *"Wolf Children."* The film includes supernatural phenomena in the form of beasts and their alternate world of Jutengai that co-exists simultaneously with modern day Japan. This is integrated into the rationality of the world as a separation known and enforced by the beasts and their culture. Whereas the wolf children are for the most part integrated into the rationality a human world. The majority of "The Boy and the Beast" involves the human Ren integrating into the rationality of Jutengai in doing so being renamed Kyuta. The film overflows with playful imagination from the exaggerated markets of Jutengai to the satirical character of the Grand Master. The emotional core of the story maintains its humanistic approach centering the film around chosen family, the impact the people you love have on your life, and how their memory might live on through you.

Similarly to Wolf Children, it was made through Studio Chizu granting Hosoda more creative freedom in its creation. *"The Boy and the Beast"* allows for certain aspects of mythorealism to truly shine within the visual, sequential and narrative progress. The representation of both the supernatural and human within the film encourages the believability of both and creates the grounds upon which an incredibly emotionally resonant and fundamentally human narrative can take place

Scene 1: The Fight in the Market of Jutengai

Figure 3. Image sequence from "The Boy and the Beast" separated by cuts within the edit. Hosoda, Mamoru, dir., The Boy and the Beast, (2015, Studio Chizu, Studiocanal, 2017), DVD.

Selected scene one is the third act and an extract from a relatively long fight sequence between the beast characters Kumatetsu and Iozen occurring in the main square of the fantastical city of Jutengai. It meets the criteria for mythorealism by presenting Jutengai as the supernatural occurrence rationalizing it into the world through the internal culture of the beasts. The scene shows its humanistic focus through displaying the different personalities of the beasts as well as their and Kyuta's reactions to the fight and uses exaggeration to derive both humour and depth from the scene.

In the sequence shot one shows the human Kyuta's face. Then Kumatetsu being repelled back by Iozen. This is followed by another shot of Kyuta. Then a close up of Kumatetsu being hit. The camera then shows Iozen's children cheering before cutting back to Kyuta. After that there is another close up of Kumatetsu being hit. Then the audience is shown the reaction of Kumatesu's friends before returning once again to a shot of Kyuta looking increasingly agitated. Shot eleven is another close up of Kumatetsu being hit followed by a close up of Kyuta's face after which the perspective switches to view Kyuta from the side as he calls out to Kumatetsu. Then we see a still of Kumatetsu's face then a shot over Kumatetsu's shoulder as he and the audience look for the origin of the voice. Finally, we see a close up of Kumatetsu's

side profile followed by a shot of Kyuta then the same shot of Kumatetsu as previously, before ending in a wide shot of the final blow of the battle where Kumatetsu is flung through the air and onto the ground.

The shots in sequence produce for an audience a conception of filmic space that describes the relationships of the characters within the diegesis and communicates Kumatetsu and Kyuta's similarities grounding the larger-than-life character of Kumatetsu and forming a basis for the suspension of disbelief through the constraints that govern this fight and additionally the world of Jutengai.

From the placement of shot one of Kyuta's face that cuts to a wide shot of the fight and the context of the surrounding audience, a viewer is able to conceptualize a spatial layout that places Kyuta in the audience and the fight in front of him, from this an inference can be made that shot two is representing not just the fight but the fight through the eyes for Kyuta. This creates a connection between Kyuta and the audience as the link schema asserts the viewer and Kyuta's positions as members of the audience. In this way the edit plays with the bodily experience of looking. Then uses this to further form a connection with what is being looked at, two beasts fighting.

Buckland writes on the topic of looking that *"Perception is not a process that only involves a relation between the eye and the mind (whether conscious or unconscious); more fundamentally, it involves the metaphorical projection of the body on screen and in frame."* [35]

The audience as Kyuta are involved in watching Kumatetsu lose the fight. The repetition of static shots of Kyuta's reaction juxtaposed with the brutality of

[35] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 51.

Kumatetsu's failure to avoid being hit builds tension and creates the anticipation necessary for Kyuta's eventual outburst cheering on Kumatetsu. The edit then breaks the pattern of switching between the two characters. To focus on Kumatetsu's and the audience's reaction to Kyuta's outburst, as he is singled out by the beasts for being the only one in favour of Kumatetsu winning this fight.

Within shots fourteen to sixteen the audience sees Kumatetsu looking for the origin of the voice cheering him on before this cuts to a shot of Kyuta. Similar to the first inference, this reversal places the audience in the eyes of Kumatetsu looking at Kyuta reciprocating the link previously established between Kyuta toward Kumatetsu now the edit links Kumatetsu to Kyuta.

This entire sequence apart from two shots is completely about Kyuta and Kumatetsu despite the implication of a larger crowd, bustling market and world beyond the frame in each shot successively Kyuta and Kumatetsu take up more and more of the screen establishing the connection between the two that becomes the emotional core of the film. They are both outsiders; they are both alone. Kyuta who is pre-established as an orphaned human who has unknowingly entered a world of beasts and Kumatetsu who is ostracized by his own kind to the point where crowds of beasts joyfully cheer as he is pummeled in the street have found each other. The likening of these two characters bridges the gap between the human and beast world implying that despite the two world's blatant visual differences both characters have found themselves the be in similar positions allowing for a more nuanced understanding of both Kumatetsu's and Kyuta's character.

In this way the supernatural maintains its believability through proposing Kumatetsu and Kyuta as reflections of each other. Creating within them both a greater depth to their humanity, without denouncing Kumatetsu's lived reality as a beast.

Ultimately allowing for the mythorealism of the film to thrive through the writing, editing and the animation.

Scene 2: Ichirohiko as the Whale

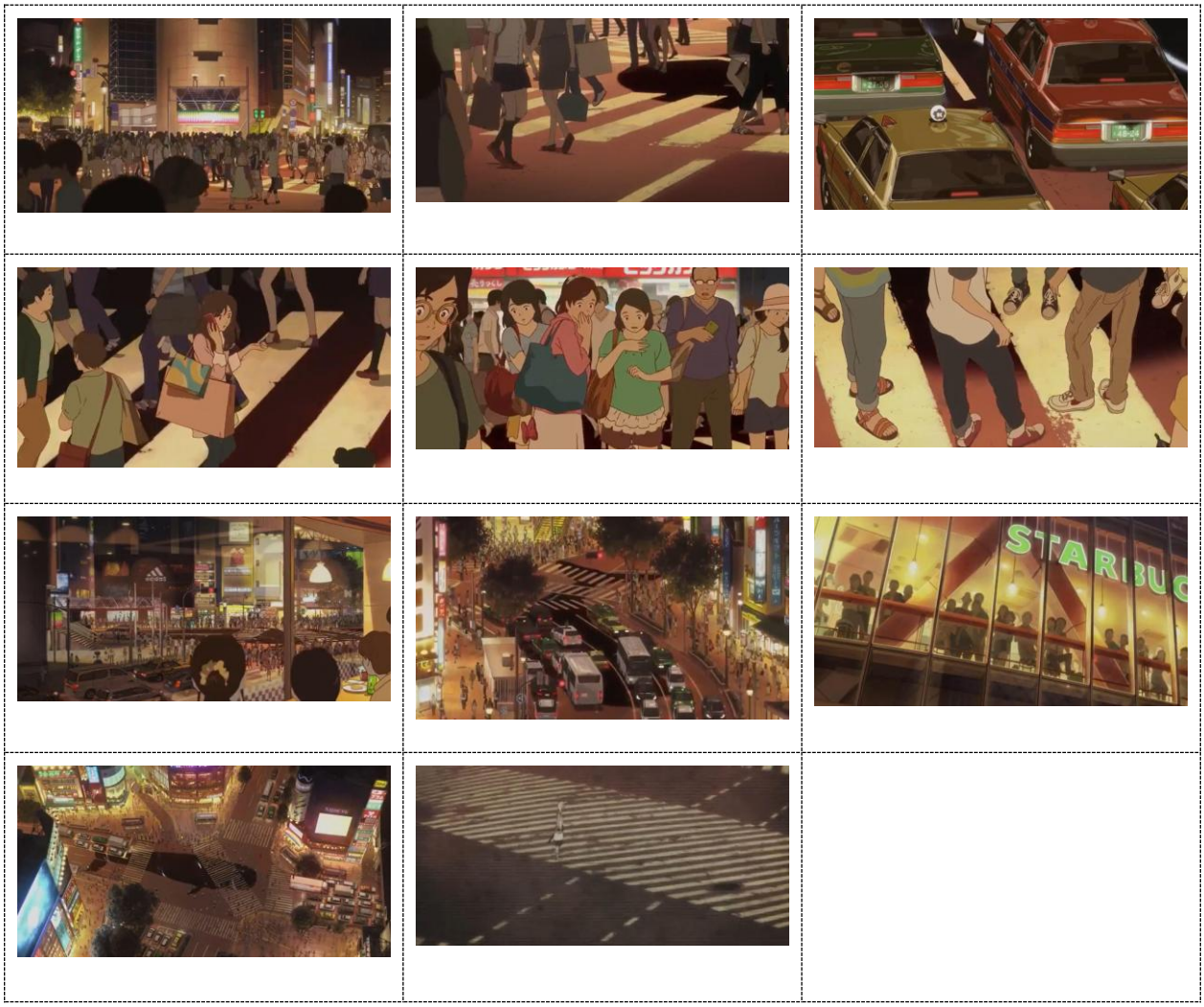

Figure 4. Image sequence from "The Boy and the Beast separated by cuts within the edit . Hosoda, Mamoru, dir., The Boy and the Beast, (2015, Studio Chizu, Studiocanal, 2017), DVD.

Selected scene two occurs in the final act of the film and involves the character Ichirohiko in the form of a whale swimming through the streets of Tokyo in search of Kyuta. It meets the criteria for mythorealism through its use of the whale

shadow as a supernatural occurrence rationalized into the world through the reactions of the crowds. It maintains a humanistic focus by depicting the fear and confusion of the onlookers and incorporates exaggeration to convey the scope of Ichirahiko's emotion.

In sequence the audience is shown a wide shot of Shibuja crossing busy with people. Then a low shot of people walking as a shadow with no origin creeps along the crossing. Then a shot of a row of traffic as the shadow travels underneath cars. Followed by a shot of the shadow being noticed by the people as it passes underneath the crossing. Then a mid-shot of a crowd reacting in confusion to the shadow and another shot of the shadow growing underneath the crowd. Shot seven brings the camera far from the origin of the shadow showing people within a building straining to look at it. Then another wide shot of it travelling beneath the traffic and a shot of people looking out from the windows of a building before finally cutting to an extreme wide encompassing the entirety of Shibuya crossing that shows the true shape of a shadow to be that of a whale. Ending with a cut to a shot of Ichirohiko standing alone amidst a deserted crossing.

The film's treatment of the appearance of the whale as a lived and supernatural event for the crowd of characters at the crossing creates a conception of filmic space that subverts an audience's expectation of a metaphorical treatment of the supernatural and adds an unknown that builds tension and anticipation for Ichirohiko and Kyuta's final confrontation. Through mythorealism's ability to manipulate the cause-and-effect schema into a more abstract realm of thought.

Until this point in the film the violence and supernatural elements have been placed solely in the jurisdiction of Jutengai. Yes the two worlds co-exist but apart from the very beginning when Kumatetsu is seen entering Jutengai. Kyuta is the only

other character seen crossing the threshold. Ichirohiko and the whale present a deviation from the norm. Buckland writes on the topic of what is and isn't shown to the audience that: *"The narrative film cues and constrains the story construction activities of the spectator"* [36]

This scene uses its sequential construction as well as the film's original supernaturality to hold onto information such that its absence creates tension for the audience.

Within the scene shots one to three show parts of the whale appearing in a busy urban environment and not affecting the surrounding. This is affirming a deliberate misdirection as the film has previously shown that such shadows do not noticeably affect their surroundings.

Here however, in shots four to nine the crowd reacts to the shadow in confusion and curiosity, stepping away from it, commenting on it, getting out of their seats to look at it properly. Ichirohiko as the whale exists in the human world. Which by proxy reaffirms Jutengai's legitimacy as real. Showing that the goings on of the beast world have an effect on the human world, positing that they are in many ways one and the same. This intentional presentation of Ichirohiko as an unknown force that affects the human world supplies Kyuta and the audience with a puzzle to solve. Inviting the audience to speculate and invest into a cause with a non-linear and unpredictable effect.

Buckland writes on films use of the cause-and-effect schema saying that in film *"it enables the spectator to process the inherently incomplete logical form of the narrative film"* [37]

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[36] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 30.
[37] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 30.

This scene plays to the strengths of audience manipulation using the film's mythorealism to present the almost unanswerable question of what can the effect of one man's lifelong self-loathing and rejection manifested into reality have on the world? To that end the pace of the edit lingers on each shot allowing ample time for audience participation which builds anticipation for the ending. Mythorealism through animation therefore allows for a communication of abstract themes and ideas to take shape and find answers through their simulation. Buckland describes how in film *"The structure of our shared bodily experience then becomes the basis for rational, abstract thought by means of image-based schemata and creative strategies such as metaphor and metonymy, which project and extend this structure from the physical domain into the abstract domain of concepts."* [38]

In this instance the mythorealistic animation takes this idea and uses it to build its narratives in a way that can allow it to settle into a middle ground. Playfully, mythorealism proposes an experience of film that prompts the audience to conceptualise and empathise with the abstract domain as if it is the physical one. To suspend their disbelief enough they forge a connection with the believable unreality of Kumatetsu's ostracization, Ichirohiko's whale of self-loathing or Kyuta's unorthodox family.

[38] Buckland, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, 42.

Conclusion

The principles of mythorealism much like its originator myth have broad roots and ties to countless bodies of work, filmic and literary with the goal of achieving true connection.

Language commands attention and often validates experience. Having words and images that accurately represent that which is often unrepresentable is invaluable and it is only through the aftermath of this knowledge that the answers to questions in related fields can reveal themselves. Without the work of authors like Yan Lianke or Xie Haiyan mythorealism would go largely unacknowledged and it is because of them that animation can gain a new avenue of analysis.

My hope is that throughout the duration of this thesis I have made clear the potential symbiotic relationship between mythorealism and animation. Based on their shared treatment of reality as a stepping stone toward truth. Mythorealistic animation hinges on the intentional and efficient use of its literary, filmic and animated elements. The result of which is a delicate balancing act rooted in a genuine appreciation of humanity in all its forms and a love for the supernatural, fantastical and unreal. Only through embracing the coexistence of its many contradictory facets does mythorealistic animation prosper, carrying on mythorealism's view of the world as *"...a single indivisible whole."* [39]

Mythorealism holds power, a new and refreshing kind of power. The type that makes you question why you feel seen by a book, a film or a piece of art. There is something about unreality that can reach out and touch your soul. This power gives a new perspective to how things far from reality can speak to you and give you

[39] Yan, Discovering Fiction, 115.

answers. The illusion is deliberately crafted, intentionally translated and incredibly human. There is no greater magic than to witness the unbelievable and still feel like you can believe.

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