

#### **Question 4**

Discuss the relationship between globalization and “*commodities and consumer culture*”. Use examples of literary or/and filmic texts to support your arguments.

#### **Introduction**

Growing up in post-war Japan, director Hayao Miyazaki witnessed Japan's transition from an agrarian, feudal and self-contained island to an industrialised, Americanised and consumer-driven society. Exposed to the sweeping force of globalisation alongside the country's economic boom, the Japanese also experienced a substantial paradigm shift. People's personal life had been radically changed, preferring more modern pursuits and consumer culture. It often came at the expense of their own cultural heritage. Seeing their cultural traditions relegated to the margins, Miyazaki was not without qualms towards the course his country took after the war.

Indeed, his vocal diatribes against the country's “single-minded pursuit towards consumerism” (Schilling) and the nefarious infiltration of Western capitalist ideology have been manifested as recurring themes in his animated movies, including *Spirited Away*<sup>1</sup> (2001). Through the theoretical concepts of “the society of the spectacle” and “commodity fetishism”, this essay would analyze the tropes of food, bingeing and purging in *Spirited Away* and how they are used to elucidate the loss and search of personal and national identities in Japan's ever-expanding consumer and commodity culture under globalisation.

#### **Food and consumerism**

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<sup>1</sup> The movie, also titled *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, is one of Miyazaki's most critically acclaimed movies of all time.

Like countless other everyday material objects, the colonisation of food under capitalism comes as no surprise.<sup>2</sup> However, unlike other commodities in the market that inscribe *on* the body, it is an indispensable source of sustenance and nourishment that is ingested *into* the body. As a result, not only does the commodification of food accentuate the omnipresence of capitalism<sup>3</sup>, punctuating our everyday life<sup>4</sup>, but it also permeates our mind and body, penetrating our very existence. As we digest food, we are also imbibing the consumerist values and internalising the capitalist logic, putting our selfhood at stake.

### **No-face, Binge Eating and Overconsumption**

In the movie, the character No-face<sup>5</sup> bears the brunt of the socially and self-destructive forces of consumerism and overconsumption. Indeed, No-face has started out as a silent masked figure who utters only soft sounds like 'Ah'. Despite his sheer size and monstrous behaviours in later scenes, his vulnerability is evident from beginning to end. His original self is comparable to a shy, friendless boy, ignored, shrugged off and marginalised by others. His mute presence and physical exclusion from the bathhouse are both illustrative of how he is yet to enter or learn the symbolic order through language or the code of conduct in a consumer society. He is a *tabula rasa* or blank slate, lacking the judgment for

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<sup>2</sup> Kristin Ross notes that the "colonisation of everyday life" (1998), oft-quoted from Lefebvre and his later Situationist devotees, should be comprehended literally as "the continuation of the structures of imperialism within the everyday, as new values of American technology and consumerism ... in [our] everyday life" (Olson 13)

<sup>3</sup> Guy Debord elucidates in *Society of the Spectacle* that in this stage of social organization, capitalism should not be seen as merely an economic system. Its omnipresence also organizes all aspects of our life in which "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" (1). Under this new mode of domination, "an undisturbed development of modern capitalism" can hence be guaranteed. (65)

<sup>4</sup> Henri Lefebvre also remarks how the "writers of his era assume a critical stance toward the urge to satisfy all desires with material objects" with "a sense of unrest" infiltrates the "everyday life" (80).

<sup>5</sup> No-face, is the literal translation of *kaonashi* in which *kao* means 'face' and *nashi* means 'without'. This character is said to be inspired by silkworms, which have markings on its head that resemble facial features with their mouths below the markings. (Egan 105). Just like these silkworms, No-face can eat voraciously and grow unceasingly. Interestingly, No-face is invited by Zeniba to be her assistant to spin silk at the end of the movie.

right and wrong. In a Lacanian sense, after entering the world of the bathhouse, his ego is formed. However, the “Real” refuses to be symbolised – he continues to be harassed by the perpetual sense of lack in companionship. As Chihiro first let him into the bathhouse, with such a small gesture of kindness, he is overjoyed by the hope to belong and be accepted. He tags along her almost like a puppy and attempts to repay her kindness with gifts like bath tokens (see Fig. 1). When she shows no interest, his emptiness becomes all the more glaring. Just then, he notices how the stink spirit, who is the river god in disguise, enthuses the staff and patrons alike with the copious amount of gold left. Inspired, he seems to know where to look for replacement to assuage the pain of loneliness. Gold materialises in the palm of his hand. It is a desperate attempt for him to situate his social identity – as the most valuable customer whom all bath women<sup>6</sup> and workers in the bathhouse fawn over and idolize.

In one the most powerful scenes (see Fig. 2), No-face is sitting in the bathtub that has been used to serve the river god as the first step of his plan to emulate the deity. Such a juxtaposition of scenes underscores No-face’s longing to become powerful, wealthy and revered like the river god. It also lends credence to Jean Baudrillard’s notion of “simulacrum” in identity formation and consumer behaviours in the capitalist society. This is because he is fabricating “an image” of himself – the constructed identity under consumerism – which bears no relation to “the reality” of one’s true selfhood as “it is its own pure simulacra” (1981). Interestingly, it is reminiscent of how Guy Debord quips, “[The] more [the spectator] accepts recognising himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires... his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him” (Debord 30). As he replicates the prevailing values and behaviour in the bathhouse, his life is reduced to mere “representations” of a person that he is not. His perceived sense of self is a mere

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<sup>6</sup> Bath women or *Yuna* live and work at the bathhouse. They clean the bathhouse, wait on and serve food to customers. Most are spirits of slugs.



simulacrum. No-face's sense of self and desires, built on gold and food, are all fabricated and driven by the consumerist environment in the bathhouse. They are not predicated on his real identity. Guy Debord notes, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." (4) As if cursed by the gift of Midas touch, his yearning for authentic relationships will never come to fruition – not when his social interactions with others are all mediated by false self-images, gold and materials. Sadly, all his social life now is reduced to "a spectacle... [in which] the commodity has attained the total occupation of [his] social life." (42).

Besides, No-face is stupefied under the consumerist illusion of "pseudo-self-control" (Adorno). Piqued by the euphoric success after his first taste of "consumer bliss" (Bauman), No-face internalised and reinforced the mistaken notion that as a consumer, being the chooser, he would find his self identity and guide himself to the road of recognition and acceptance. It is said that "beggars can't be choosers". Presumably, as a chooser, he would be anything but a beggar. Ironically, he remains inflicted by the poverty of "authentic social relationships" (Debord) despite his endless flow of wealth and sensual-material pleasures. As Marx elucidates in his idea of "commodity fetishism" that "[f]antasy arising from desire deceives the fetish worshipper into believing that an 'inanimate object' will give up its natural character in order to comply with his desires", the gratification of sensuous desires is fleeting and momentary.<sup>7</sup> The possession-defined success and a hedonistic lifestyle would grant him no permanent satisfaction. After all, as long as he remains a passive consumer caught up in the socio-economic system centred on subservience and conformity, he would ensure no real agency over his life and desires.

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<sup>7</sup> Freud also shares the same sentiment towards the consumer age, "there is no such thing as the *state* of happiness; we are happy only for a brief moment when satisfying a vexing need, but immediately afterwards boredom sets in. The object of desire loses its allure once the reason to desire it has disappeared." (Zygmunt)

Apart from the fabricated social identity as a customer mediated by false images, No-face also resorts to binge eating and consuming to fill the abysmal void from within – even to the extreme extent of cannibalism – consuming others into his stomach. Curiously, in the aforementioned scene, the once demure No-face baits the greedy Aogaeru with gold and swallows the unsuspecting green treefrog in one gulp (see Fig. 2). In a literal sense, No-face is “consuming” the world fabricated by others, internalising the treefrog’s avarice. As he literally and symbolically takes on the voice of the Aogaeru, he gives up finding a voice of his own. He is eating himself from the inside out. As he consumes others, his entire life is also “consumed” by consumerism, reducing himself to a reproducer echoing and reverberating the dominant rhetoric of consumerism, discourse of capitalism and values of greed and materials desires. So long as the relationships are mediated by materials and the fabricated image of oneself, no food, flattery and adoration from the staff could completely quell his loneliness. Indeed, had he not been corrupted by greed and decadence in the bathhouse, he would not have perverted into such a monster.

### **Purging and healing - the redemptive power of food**

There is no mistaking that the permeability of our bodies often leaves us exposed to the assault of consumerism, symbolised by food and acts of bingeing in *Spirited Away*. However, proper food in moderation also nourishes and cleanses bodies and souls (see Fig. 3 and 7).

First, some food has the healing power to eradicate the ills of consumerism. For instance, Chihiro’s magic herbal cake gifted by the river god is key to helping No-face regain his identity and selfhood as it purges the corrupting force of consumerism, artificially created and subjective sense of insufficiency and desires within him (see Fig. 8 and 9). The healing power is the most salient in the stark contrast between his insatiable gluttony in the bathhouse and the later scene after the purge in Zeniba’s home in which we

find him politely savouring the cheesecake in Zeniba<sup>8</sup>'s house, taking little notice of his surrounding. The magic herbal cake also helps Haku spew out the cursed golden seal and the black slug which is a parasite Yubaba<sup>9</sup> put into Haku in order to control him. The herbal cake is an antidote to Max Weber's disenchanted world under the "flattening trend of globalisation" and consumerism as "disenchanted objects are re-enchanted, rescued from commercial circulation... reendowed with the *magic* of creative efforts imbued with [aura and] pleasure" (Wang 455).

Besides, food can be reinvigorating. Before stepping into the spiritual realm, Chihiro is a typical angsty, apathetic teenage girl who is disinterested in anything. Sulking in the backseat, she buries herself in piles of shopping bags (see Fig. 10) which are evidently analogous of consumerism. Her adolescence phase is also symbolic of the blasé, passive consumer life among people who are plagued by *ennui*, characterised by lingering melancholy, boredom and sadness. It is a common malady among those feeling enervated by the futile chase after happiness through endless consumption attempting to satisfy the insatiable desire. Deeply mired in the quicksands of consumerism, people could not extricate themselves from the dire situation so they remain paralysed in inaction. Just like these people, Chihiro finds herself stuck in the spiritual realm, encountering setbacks, challenges and adversities that force her to grow up overnight. She has been disillusioned and helpless until she gobbles down the magic *onigiri* or rice cakes offered by Haku. Even though she eats in tears (see Fig. 7), the food has uplifted her spirits, put things into perspective and renewed her energy to continue her venture in this ruthless world.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>8</sup> Sister of Yubaba. Zeniba abhors the materialistic environment of the bathhouse and the mercenary disposition of her sister.

<sup>9</sup> The master of the bathhouse who symbolises the bourgeois in the capitalist microcosm



*Spirited Away* has often been touted as a coming-of-age story<sup>10</sup>. Yet, it is more than a story about a girl growing up, but about the modernizing Japan. It is a cautionary tale against overconsumption in an intensely economically-driven environment. Not just Japan or Hong Kong, the so-called third world countries are no exception under this all-encompassing global force of consumerism. No one is immune to influences from consumerism. It is a Herculean task to go against the tide of dominant ideology. Encompassed by the omnipresent ideoscape<sup>11</sup>, everyone around us could be reproducers of the ideology<sup>12</sup> and we are vulnerable to moral degeneration just like No-face.

Yet, it is not all gloom and doom. Just like the trope of food<sup>13</sup>, commodities can bring forth malign or benign forces, and we could choose how and what we consume. Resonant to what Jane Bennett contends in her book on disenchantment, it is not about “whether [we should] live with commodities but how [we] participate in commodity culture” (113). After all, hardly could we find capitalist or non-capitalist societies sans “some role for the commodity form”. The question lies in how we are to “reform commodity culture to render it more just and more ecologically sustainable and how to extract the ethical potential within commodity culture.” (113) In the midst of the disorienting consumer culture, perhaps we could treat ourselves with a “re-enchanted” homemade cookie like those in Zeniba’s humble

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<sup>10</sup> The movie is often seen as the bildungsroman tale of Chihiro, who changes from a sullen and whiny pre-teenager, disenchanted with her parents, to an independent person who gains maturity, bravery and moral character of selflessness while retaining kindness and sympathy as the story progresses.

<sup>11</sup> Arjun Appadurai has expounded on how deterritorialisation has been a “central forces of the modern world” (37) in expanding the *ideoscape* (36) across the globe and propagating “consumerism... [and] craving... for new commodities and spectacles” (40).

<sup>12</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer. “The Cultural Industry” (1944)

<sup>13</sup> Kima Cargill, author of *The Psychology of Overeating: Food and the Culture of Consumerism* (2016), notes that “overeating is not strictly a problem of food or eating—it is a problem of consuming... the larger systematic problem of how the culture of consumerism traps people in poverty... and limitless desire”. It is especially true that the hyper palatable food can be so sensuously addictive that people can be blindsided and fall into the material trap of consuming for the sake of mere consumption.

home and regain our foothold in the contesting sites of identity politics through another bite of the magic herbal cake.



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Appendix



Fig. 1

Before being corrupted by the malignant influences of consumerism, No-face simply wants to help and please Chihiro to repay her kindness.



Fig. 2

No-face swallows Aogaru in one mouthful - a symbolic scene that dramatizes his literal internalisation of consumer values.



Fig. 3

While binge symbolises the unbridled gratification of instincts of overconsumption and consumerism, food provides essential nourishment to our survival. Just as Haku says, "Unless you eat something from this world, you will vanish."



Fig. 4

Symbols of consumerism are apparent in this scene as Chihiro's family – Audi car and piles of shopping bags. As their car accelerates through the cobbled road through the forest, a symbol of the inexorably speedy development of consumerism. With a sudden slam on the brakes, the car grinds to a halt right at the front of a stone shrine. As if beckoned by the mysterious tunnel, they find a deserted theme park.





Fig. 5

Assured that they are able to pay for the meal, Chihiro's parents help themselves to the arrays of tantalizingly inviting delicacies without any second thoughts.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 6

The more voracious he consumes, the bigger he grows. Portrayed as a masked dark presence, he is emblematic of an "empty being". His gluttony is a desperate attempt to fill the void from within.



Fig. 7

After a long day of narrow escapes and gruelling work, Chihiro gobbles down the *onigiri* or rice cakes offered by Haku. Even though she eats in tears, the food has uplifted her spirits, renewed her energy and offered her consolation and encouragement to continue her venture in this spiritual world.



Fig. 8

No-face regurgitates the food and people he has eaten, he shrinks in his size too.

<sup>14</sup> In Susan Napier's essay "Matter Out of Place", she contends that "it is surely no accident that the parents' orgy of credit-card approved consumption takes place inside the theme park, evoking the orgy of material consumption that characterized the 1980's and 1990's" (301). The scene is an implicit commentary to the modus operandi of the capitalist world, "Money makes the world go round".



Fig. 9

In the confrontation scene between Chihiro and No-face, she offers him a small “bitter *dango*” – the bitter dumpling – which is the remaining half of the magic herbal cake gifted by the river god. It helps literally and symbolically purge his mess from the inside out.



Fig. 10

The car is a symbolically liminal space filled with shopping bags and consumer goods shuttling Chihiro from her old home to the new one. Chihiro is also experiencing the tumultuous transitional period of adolescence. It is a coming-of-age metaphor also of modernizing Japan grappling with consumerism and Western influences.