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Living with Nature: Miyazaki Films as Fantasies and Frameworks of a Human-Nature
Coexistence

Within each Studio Ghibli film is a piece of director Hayao Miyazaki. The critically acclaimed animator incorporates remnants of his own ideologies and internal conflicts into every feature film that is lovingly hand-painted and written. The director's personal connection to the material translates into a radical approach towards critical issues about human connection. Although several of the narrative features created by the animation studio are considered wholesome reimaginings of the everyday, mundane world, they never fail to defy tradition. Strong female protagonists are the heart of Miyazaki films, where the young characters maintain a liberating sense of agency that allows them to have purposeful effects upon their worlds. These adolescent heroines are placed at the forefront of ecological films that have become the soul of Miyazaki's oeuvre. "I've come to a point where I just can't make a movie without addressing the problem of humanity as part of an ecosystem," the esteemed storyteller proclaims (qtd in Morgan 172). The idea of humankind as a mere element of a larger natural world is deeply rooted within environmental narratives that explore multifaceted hostilities and resolutions between humans and nature.

Civilization brings with it the destruction of entire worlds that are seemingly detached from our own— mountains, forests, oceans, and their inhabitants devastated for the sake of human survival. Time and time again, the human world strays from its roots and engages in a futile war against the almighty forces of Nature. The repercussions of humanity's exploitation and disregard for the natural world are explored in Miyazaki films. *Princess Mononoke* (1997)

follows the progression of a fervent animosity between an industrialized society and animals of a sacred forest that is driven by a commitment to sustain each domain. At first glance, the wild and shockingly violent film is the generic inverse to the whimsical and lighthearted *Ponyo* (2008), a variation of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* that follows a young boy and girl as they unknowingly disrupt and restore the balance between marine life and humanity. Combating *Ponyo*'s playful narrative, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) depicts dire environmental unrest as humans face an increasing hostility against a world of insects after the devastation of the earth. Despite their outward differences, the three stories are united under an ecological fantasy of the restoration of the neglected kinship between humans and nature. Susan Napier, a scholar of Japanese animation, asserts that *Princess Mononoke* offers an "alternative, heterogeneous, and female-centered vision of [Japan] for the future." Although this thinking is applied to the one film, I argue that each of the three ecological narratives creates a reality that can serve as a blueprint for the future of the Anthropocene.

Princess Mononoke, *Ponyo*, and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* establish an idealized ecology in which humanity and nature may achieve a peaceful coexistence. Environmentally focused Miyazaki films form a continuum, as they each explore a different stage of conflict between human and nonhuman worlds in efforts to provide a model for addressing the ramifications of anthropogenic ecological crises. *Princess Mononoke* offers the possibility of a symbiotic relationship through a historical journey to bind nature and civilization. *Ponyo* presents a highly idealistic, near apocalyptic fantasy of the human-nature coexistence based on preexisting devastation. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* provides a framework for existing with the ruins of nature after the earth endures the consequences of human exploitation. In each film, hybridity and amicable human-animal relations are proposed as solutions to

hostilities between humankind and natural forces. Miyazaki radically envisions the empowerment of both nature and humanity through the creation of animated alternate realities in which humankind regains the potential to live harmoniously alongside natural world.

Animated film functions as a liminal space, as the inherent inventiveness of the medium enables the creation of fantastical contexts through which experimental solutions arise for abstract, real-world issues.¹ This liminal quality is utilized to establish alternate realities that explore the possibility of mending the human-nature relationship in the wake of environmental catastrophe. Set in the Muromachi period, the events of *Princess Mononoke* occur during an era that predates rapidly ensuing modernization in Japan. Humanity finds itself within a critical transitional period where they have not yet engaged in the drastic exploitation of natural resources. The story's medieval time period enables a rewriting of history in which civilizational and technological advances can be situated in tandem with the preservation of nature. Inversely, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* takes place "1,000 years after the collapse of industrial civilization," where the battle between human forces and the animal world could result in either the extinction of humankind or the replenishment of the earth (1:46). The post-apocalyptic film reimagines human-nature relations after anthropogenic devastation of the earth while providing a glimpse into a consequential future. Alternative outcomes— perhaps those in which the two domains work alongside each another— can be brought to fruition. The two films fall on opposite ends of the continuum, as the liminality of their time frames suggests that humanity has the chance to prevent further ecological destruction as well as overcome it.

Ponyo exists on the continuum between the earlier films, as humanity retains the ability to restore the balance with nature in the midst of an ensuing, human-induced crisis. Liminality

¹ To be liminal is to exist on the boundary between two states in a transitional manner (OED).

operates through the *mise en scène*, as the tsunami that engulfs Japan is reconcilable upon human action.² The infiltration of marine life into the human world by way of a tsunami, animated in the form of giant fish, creates a surreal image that prompts consideration of apocalyptic repercussions due to human pollution. Humanity faces devastation after Ponyo, a little fish determined to be human, disrupts the balance of nature with her magic. The flooded setting acts as an intermediate space between a flourishing civilization and possible extinction. Despite the childlike, fantastical context, the images of ancient fish revitalized among inaccessible city streets incites a pang of unease that is reflective of a larger apocalyptic concern on behalf of humankind. The film puts forth the consequences of an adamant detachment from the natural world through the collision of civilization and the ocean. It is only in a transitional space that boundaries between the human and the animal, as well as the natural and the modernized, can be dissolved in order to understand the larger ramifications of human disregard for the environment. As a medium that is creatively limitless, animation enables the imagination of nature as an entity fueled by a preeminent agency that allows it to be an active participant in its potential devastation.



Figure 1. Fish of the Devonian Age infiltrate the highways of Japan

² *Mise en scène* includes the setting of the film as it is composed on the screen (Gocsik et. al 238).

The supernatural rendering of the environment and its inhabitants, specifically the animal deities, ocean life, and mutant insects, liberates nature from its image as a submissive causality that is under the absolute authority of the human world. Nature's power is transformed by the otherworldly abilities bestowed upon the animal figures through the fictional capacity of animation. Ursula Heise, a scholar of environmental literature, applies the concept of "plasmaticness" to the animated nature film: animated bodies defy principle, and in doing so create a new vision of nonhuman agency that destabilizes the perception of nature as a vulnerable, exploitable entity (Heise 309, 310).³ The morphing, boundless body possessed by the mystical, nonhuman characters gives new meaning to the concept of animism, in which life is attributed to inanimate and natural objects that are perceived to be entangled with human interests (OED; Britannica). Miyazaki's animals are autonomous beings designed with sentience, the ability to have a voice, and the capacity to act against devouring human forces in a manner that destabilizes rationalist standards of agency.⁴ When the *shishigami*, god of life, death, and the sacred forest, is beheaded in *Princess Mononoke*, its boundless form destroys all life in its path. The plasmatic body carries out the ultimate consequence for the destruction of the environment, which extends beyond the natural world as both nature and the ironworks are destroyed. The creative mechanisms of animation empower the natural world through its ability to become a deciding force in the fate of humanity. *Ponyo* reconceptualizes the strength of ocean waves as it gains the capacity morph and consume in a supernatural manner. The intensified rendering of the water leads it to "become a live and memorably angry character in the film" (Napier 3). The

³ Plasmaticness is a term coined by filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein that is used to describe the infinite ability of the animated body (Heise 305).

⁴ Greek philosopher Aristotle established the normative theory of rationalism, in which animals were not capable of reasoning and therefore were inferior to Anthropos (Donaldson). Miyazaki's animals subvert these notions as they maintain the capacity to make judgments and to radically alter the human world.

unworldly tsunami that restores the ocean to its Devonian age creates a fantasy of nature in which it holds the capacity to take back the earth as the supreme entity. Miyazaki's distinct and imaginative visions of nature reveal its dimensionality as its relationship to humankind changes.



Figure 2. The Nightwalker destroys the ironworks Figure 3. A tsunami of fish emerges from the ocean

The empowerment of nature becomes tethered to revolutionary visions of female agency as both entities overcome convictions of their vulnerability through the films' strong, adolescent heroines. Ecofeminist Catherine Roach argues that the parallels drawn between women and nature are detrimental to the perception of both groups, as women become dehumanized when equated with nature, while nature becomes exploitable in "sharing [women's] semihuman quality" (51). San of *Princess Mononoke* and Nausicaä subvert problematic notions of femininity and nature through their respective connections with nonhuman animals and rejection of orthodoxy. As a princess who saves her valley and restores peace amongst two opposing forces, Nausicaä reverses the traditional "damsel in distress" archetype. She herself becomes the savior in her attempt to put an end to the futile war between kingdoms as well as save humankind through both scientific and empathetic connections to the natural world. Nausicaä's reversal of a long-standing feminine archetype is coupled with the transformation of insects from disregarded, abject beings to powerful entities through the interconnection that is established between them.⁵

⁵ The mutant insects of *Nausicaä* are empowered through a reversal of scale, both physically and figuratively as the human world must now take the danger of the insects into larger consideration.

While Nausicaä reconceptualizes the power of both women and nature within the post-apocalyptic society, San completely rejects the patriarchal collectivity that exploits both entities through her “[alignment] with the grotesque and the nonhuman” (Rifa-Valls 94; Napier 238). The princess of monsters maintains a “female [and] bestial” Otherness that incites fear and rage from the ironworks, a response that is rooted in a dissonance caused by her hybrid, animal-like behavior and attire (Napier 183). Because both women and nature are conventionally perceived as docile, exploitable beings, San’s characterization as an unruly young protagonist reverses the often ‘cute’ feminization of nature.⁶ As the embodiment of the animal world’s ferocity, the princess of monsters undermines the intertwined perception of both women and nature as meek and exemplifies their powerful dualistic qualities.

Nature is the main actor of Miyazaki films; its duality as a sublime but threatening entity is reflected by the hand-painted visual imagery that redirects the focus onto the natural world. Serene stills of fantastical environmental settings illuminate the majestic quality of natural spaces. The scenery of these worlds is painted with beautiful hues of green and blue, which contrasts the lifeless browns of both the ironworks and surviving kingdoms. Vibrant colors are used in natural spaces to signal that they are teeming with undisturbed life, while muted hues present the human world as mechanical. *Princess Mononoke*’s lively, natural scenes that complement Ashitaka’s heroic journey feature either calm instrumental music or lack non-diegetic sound entirely in order to maintain focus on the simple yet dynamic qualities of the natural world (see fig. 4).⁷ Quiet, intimate moments with the forest of the *shishigami* and the Sea of Decay, realms which are both considered to be dangerous for human beings, compel the

⁶ Scholars Michelle Smith and Elizabeth Parsons note that San deconstructs the typical Japanese representation of adolescent female characters, which they call the “cult of cuteness” (31-32).

⁷ Non-diegetic sound is defined as sound that is edited into the film, such as music (Gocsik et. al 241).

audience to marvel at the beauty of nature. The magnificence of the Sea of Decay is exemplified by a grand establishing shot that displays the splendor of the toxic jungle (see fig. 5).⁸ In many scenes, humans are rendered as secondary characters to the grandeur of nature. These wonderful images of the natural world are meant to incite an appreciation for the environment that humanity carelessly threatens. Nature's fearsome qualities are only unearthed once the human characters cross a line.



Figure 4. Ashitaka traverses the mountains



Figure 5. Nausicaä explores the Sea of Decay

Nature is rendered as a threatening force that opposes human civilization once the integrity of the environment is compromised. *Princess Mononoke's* animal gods are framed as inherently violent, abject monsters. The opening scene of the film features an unidentifiable, ghastly perpetrator whose arrival is made suspenseful through a sequence of toppling trees, distant rumbling sounds, and forbearing camera shifts that signal danger. The raging, nearly unstoppable creature is depicted as a threat to civilization as it targets protagonist Ashitaka's village (see fig. 6). *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind's* mutant insects share the same abject qualities that are intensified by exaggerations of scale.⁹ The awe evoked by a spectacular image of a monumental Ohmu shell is immediately undermined by a sequence in which respected Lord

⁸ An establishing shot establishes the setting of the scene, as well as the character's relationship to the environment (Gocsik et. al 214).

⁹ Scale is defined as the "size and placement of a particular object or a part of a scene in relation to the rest" (Gocsik et. al 252)

Yupa is chased by the very same, raging insect. The same scale that was utilized to display the grandeur of the insect is now used to designate it as the enemy. Frenzied music heightens the intensity of the scene and stark, sudden colors illuminate the screen as the Ohmu is stunned, designating it as a worthy and fearsome opponent. In both films, nature is presented as a danger to humanity: the animal deities are hazards to the development of the ironworks, while the giant insects are a risk of human extinction. Miyazaki's dual rendering of the animal world, which "commands awe, and even fear of nature," is a critical component of establishing its opposition to the human world (Smith and Parsons 33). Both creatures were merely responding to threats posed by humanity within their respective domains. It is later discovered that the god, who dies while cursing the human world, had been metamorphosized by an iron bullet. Similarly, the wrathful insect was alarmed by a gunshot in the Sea of Decay. Therefore, the rage and violence of the nonhuman world is not entirely unprompted, as each had merely fulfilled their role as a protector of the earth that is endangered by human induced annihilation.¹⁰



Figure 6. Nago threatens Ashitaka's village



Figure 7. An Ohmu chases Lord Yupa

Alongside both marvelous and fearsome representations of nature are images of environmental destruction that shift the gaze onto anthropogenic causes of ecological crises. The

¹⁰ Moro, the god of the wolf tribe and San's mother, resembles the extinct Japanese wolf. The wolf became symbolic of the state of human-nature relationship in Japan, as they were initially protectors of village peoples, but became a dangerous force once their habitat was destroyed by farming (Knight 143). The aggression on behalf of Moro and the Japanese wolf exemplifies that nature becomes a hostile entity once the environment is threatened.

magic of Ponyo and her family showcase the beauty and glory of the sea and marine life. The sublime quality of nature is not subverted with negative images of the natural world itself, but instead with visuals of human pollution of the ocean (see fig. 8). Devouring nets and overwhelming amounts of waste threaten the young protagonist in the opening scene of the film, which signifies humanity as a complicit antagonist. The violence and destruction that stems from the natural world is a response to the senselessness of humankind. Images of brutal and savage war contrast the fantastical visions of nature in both *Princess Mononoke* and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. War is presented as a cold, futile act that only agitates hostilities between the human and nature. By shifting the gaze on the divisiveness and harm that is caused by human disregard for the natural world, Miyazaki attempts to reestablish the interdependency that is vital to a peaceful coexistence between the two realms. The defeat of the *shishigami* means the destruction of the ironworks. The war between kingdoms brings them closer to extinction, while making peace with the Sea of Decay ensures a future for humankind. The pollution that encapsulates the young fish is the inspiration behind an elixir made to eradicate humanity. While Miyazaki films are a celebration of the vibrant life found within the natural world, they also challenge and critique long-held standards of interactions between man and nature.



Figure 8. Ponyo becomes a victim of pollution

Adult, authoritative female figures feature in ecological Miyazaki films as human antagonists, from which problematical implications arise as the women are chastised for their

approach to human-nature hostilities. Although revolutionary due to the power they hold in roles made for men, the two women are framed as unstoppable perpetrators of violence with the audience as mere witnesses to their havoc (see fig. 9 and fig. 10).¹¹ Ecofeminist scholar Cynthia Belmont devises the “natural disaster heroine” archetype, in which dominating female characters must be subdued in order to reconcile the chaos of nature (350). Scholars Wendi Sierra et. al apply this pattern to *Princess Mononoke*’s Lady Eboshi, the strong-willed leader of the ironworks whose incapacitated state at the end of the film is interpreted as a form of punishment for her defiance of gender expectations (45-47). I argue that it is Eboshi’s relationship with nature, not her femininity, that leads to her diminishment of her power. Kushana, the ruthless leader of the Torumekia, is disabled in a similar manner due to an altercation with an insect. The two women are paralleled in their determination to control and take over natural spaces: Eboshi wants to destroy the forest of the *shishigami* for the development of Irontown, while Kushana is determined to destroy the insect species so that humans may claim dominion over the earth once more. Lady Eboshi and Kushana are the antithetical counterparts to the young heroines San and Nausicaä, as they attempt to forcefully maintain the boundaries between humans and animals that are troubled by the adolescent protagonists. They are not ruined for their ambition, but for their endeavor to dominate nature in addition to their denial of human-animal transcendence. Eboshi and Kushana, symbols of the adult world, lack an attunement to nature that is critical towards the recognition of the independency between humans and the environment.

¹¹ Lady Eboshi’s character is further complicated through her care for human beings who have been historically abjected, such as those who suffer from leprosy and girls she has saved from brothels. The utopian refuge she provides deconstructs the notion that technology and modernization are the primary destructive force against nature (Napier 185).



Figure 9. Lady Eboshi in the war against gods



Figure 10. Kushana in the war against insects

A harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural world finds its beginnings within relationships that develop between the young protagonists of Miyazaki films.¹² Bonds that form between human and hybrid characters redefine the human-nature relationship and establish a new ethics of care. The attachment that forms between the hybrid characters of *Princess Mononoke* is based on mutual Otherness, as San is neither entirely human nor animal, and Ashitaka, as an Emishi boy, belongs to neither nature nor civilization (Abbey 117).¹³ Connected by their reverence for the natural world, the two marginal beings join forces to end the conflict between the gods and the ironworks. The Other prevails in Miyazaki's reality, where attunement to the natural world is no longer a cause for ostracization, but a source of triumph. It is the two protagonists that restore the head of the *shishigami*, which leads to the replenishment of the forest, a second chance for the ironworks, and the possibility that both the environment and civilization can thrive in tandem. The friendship that develops between Ponyo and Sosuke is also critical to restoring the balance between humanity and nature. The little fish's metamorphosis into a human disrupts the stability of the natural world, and it is a test of love that must remedy

¹² Miyazaki emphasizes that he strays from traditional portrayals of romance: "I want to portray a slightly different relationship, one where the two mutually inspire each other to live - if I'm able to, then perhaps I'll be closer to portraying a true expression of love" (qtd. in Marcotte). This unconventionality functions within the bonds between human and hybrid figures that inspire humanity to live alongside nature.

¹³ Environmental humanities scholar Kristian Abbey notes the "painfully unromantic" kiss that occurs between San and Ashitaka, in which she chews a piece of meat for the weakened boy (117). This act not only challenges the typical standards of romance but is reflective of an intimacy that is innocent and true.

it.¹⁴ Sosuke's care for nature is apparent from the moment that he saves the little goldfish on the beach and then goes on to protect and feed her. The boy doesn't hesitate to accept Granmamare's request to love her daughter as a human without magic, which enables peace to resume between humankind and the ocean. Sosuke's love and compassion for Ponyo constructs a standard of care for the natural world that is based on pure intention and respect for earth's creatures. These bonds offer a model for the human-nature coexistence that is built on the recognition of interdependency. Each relationship promises the possibility of future balance between human and natural worlds by bridging the gap of hostility.

The concept of love as a resolution for hostilities between humanity and nature functions differently in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, as the protagonist's otherworldly connection with the mutant insects establishes the interdependency and ethics of care that is required for reconciliation between the two entities. Because the world has already undergone the consequences of human induced destruction, the critical bond that must be formed is not between a hybrid and human figure, but directly between humanity and the natural world. A beautiful friendship exists between the insects and the young princess, who recognizes the sentience of the animals that are adamantly feared by the Valley. The young heroine's treatment of the abject creatures, which involves no harm or violence against them, sets the example for a newfound ethics of care towards nature that is necessary for the continued survival of humankind. Nausicaä's peaceful approach does not go unnoticed by the incredibly conscious beings, and she is doubly rewarded for her intervention against the ruthless kingdoms. When she sacrifices her life to save the population of Ohmus, they demonstrate their care for the girl by healing her fatal

¹⁴ An ontological anxiety is evoked by the Ponyo's efforts to be human, as the young girl's hybridity troubles the concept of human origination. The little fish's metamorphosis attributes creation to the natural world, and a further dissonance is incited by Ponyo's transformation in which she consistently shifts between human and animal states in order to perform magic.

wounds. Nausicaä then walks across their glowing tentacles, in which the illuminated golden hue signifies her enlightened perspective of the human-nature relationship (see fig. 11). A critical interdependence is revealed by these interactions: if humanity takes care of nature, the natural world will care for humankind. The young heroine's connection and consideration for the insects of a post-apocalyptic world sets a critical example for an ecological coexistence long after anthropogenic devastation of the earth.



Figure 11. Nausicaä walks across a field of gold

The characters' journeys, in which they intervene with anthropogenic destruction, challenges the ideologies of the viewer who has the potential to prevent future environmental crises in their own world. A sense of urgency towards ecological remedy is created as the characters' successes or failures become entangled with implications that are applicable to the audience's reality. Humanity is left at a crossroads at the close of both *Princess Mononoke* and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. Although each film occurs at the opposite ends of the continuum, the human characters are tasked with rebuilding civilization in accordance with the consideration of the natural world. *Princess Mononoke* suggests that there remains an opportunity to situate modernization alongside the needs of nature, while *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* offers hope that humans and nature can both rebuild long after the endurance of destruction. As a fantasy narrative that appeals to children, *Ponyo* models how adolescents can

navigate a world that has succumbed to environmental ruin (Napier 6).¹⁵ The film operates as a hopeful coming-of-age story, as Ponyo and Sosuke are left to their own devices on their adventure to unintentionally restore harmony amongst the ocean and humanity. Each film gains its didacticism through a quest to unite opposing worlds that features adolescent heroes at its forefront. As they take on the crises furthered by the adult world and resolve critical environmental issues, the protagonists of Miyazaki films signify that the younger generations are the future of the harmonious human-nature coexistence.

Miyazaki films establish a framework for the human-nature relationship at its various states, both past and future, in an attempt to offer mechanisms of reconciliation for hostilities that emerge from ecological unrest. In working out his own dissatisfaction with humankind's disregard for the environment, Miyazaki grants the natural world a voice that demands attention as it no longer accepts its role as a causality of human advancement. The human world is challenged to deconstruct its rigidly held binaries in favor of the interdependency that must occur for humanity and nature to thrive as one. Within each narrative are remnants of hope in the form of characters who are rightfully attuned to the natural world and retain faith in humanity's ability to overcome its flawed perception of uncompromising dominion over the earth and its creatures. The films' protagonists recognize the sentience and magnificence of the natural world, qualities that are often forgotten in an effort to create distance from environmental responsibility, and ultimately decide to live alongside nature. Although Miyazaki's fantastical vision is merely a work of animated film, each paints a picture of what the world once was as well as what it could be. The future is in the hands of humanity, and it is up to us to decide which reality we'd like to create.

¹⁵ Napier argues that this "imagination of disaster" enables audience to contemplate and plan ahead of disaster, which she terms "pre-traumatic stress syndrome" (6).

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Appendix. Figures

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