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Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 2, Number  
3, Fall 2015, pp. 120-126 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



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# Neutering the Monster, Pruning the Green

The Ecological Evolutions of  
*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

NATHANIEL HEGGINS BRYANT

The postapocalyptic anime *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) is one of Hayao Miyazaki's most important films. Based on the first two parts of a long-running manga series published in *Animage* magazine, the film was a critical and commercial success in Japan, resulting in the formation of Studio Ghibli in 1985. In the film, Miyazaki establishes many of the important tropes appearing in later Ghibli features, such as the metaphor of flight, the critique of rampant industrialism tied to imperialism and warfare, the condemnation of atomic power, and the relationship between man and nature. It also begins a long line of films featuring strong female lead characters. *Nausicaä* is one of the most notable animated films to take up environmental and ecological concerns, having generated quite a bit of scholarly attention because of its green message, and its power remains undiminished thirty-one years after its initial release.<sup>1</sup> The film follows the exploits of Princess Nausicaä, a pacifist and environmentally conscious character, as she navigates her small nation's future between the warring kingdom of Pejite and the militaristic Tolmekian Empire. The film is set a thousand years after a catastrophic (presumably atomic) global event called the Seven Days of Fire, which was caused by living bioweapons named God Warriors. The Days of Fire ruined much of the planet's soil and water and gave rise to the Toxic Jungle, a deadly fungal environment whose only denizens

are many species of monstrous mutant insects like the Ohmu, a gigantic multiple-eyed insect that looks like an armored pill bug and lives in enormous herds.

The jungle's continual spread threatens the few remaining livable spaces on the planet and spurs territorial wars. Nausicaä lives in the Valley of the Wind, an idyllic, windmill-studded agrarian society that has acclimated itself to life near the Toxic Jungle while remaining safe from it, as continual sea winds keep the jungle's spores at bay. She makes many incursions deep into the jungle, studying its plant and animal life; and she also has a preternatural understanding and empathy with all creatures on the earth, particularly the Ohmu. She discovers that the Toxic Jungle cleanses the earth of the ecological devastation that followed the Days of Fire—she learns that the water, air, and soil beneath the jungle are pure. She also realizes that the Ohmu herds protect the jungle and spread it. When a herd invades a new kingdom, they bring jungle spores with them, and their dead bodies serve as the seedbed for new growth.

Near the beginning of the film, a large Tolmekian airplane crashes in the valley, bearing the single remaining God Warrior embryo left over from the Days of Fire. Tolmekia had stolen the embryo from Pejite, and the Tolmekian army invades Nausicaä's valley to recapture it. That army is led by Princess Kushana, who desires to use the God Warrior to burn away the Toxic Jungle and wrest control of the earth away from the giant insects. Pejite attempts to steal back the embryo by baiting an Ohmu herd to attack and destroy Kushana's army and the valley. Kushana revives the God Warrior to attack the herd, but it falls apart after making two nuclear blasts. Nausicaä sacrifices herself to the angry herd of Ohmu, who stop their attack. One of the important narrative dynamics of the film is the weight of an old prophecy articulated by a wise witch woman from the valley: "After one thousand years of darkness he will come, clad in blue and surrounded by fields of gold, to restore mankind's connection with the earth that was destroyed. And he will guide the people of this planet at last to a land of purity." Covered in blue Ohmu blood, Nausicaä arises from her self-sacrifice on the golden tendrils that emerge from the pacified Ohmu herd; they raise her while reviving her and, in so doing, fulfill the prophecy. The final, hopeful image of the film, a small green plant growing beneath the Toxic Jungle near Nausicaä's lost gas mask, indicates that humankind has finally reached a kind of ecological understanding from her patient example.

The release of *Nausicaä* in the United States is a rather convoluted and revealing one. In 1985 the first version to reach a US audience was a heavily edited version retitled *Warriors of the Wind*. Nearly twenty minutes of the Japanese version was cut, most of which concerned the overt critique of industrial and atomic power and the apocalyptic environmental degradation that occurred hundreds of year prior to the plot of the film. Although pirated and bootleg copies of the full film would eventually circulate in the United States, it would not be until the official Disney–Studio Ghibli rerelease of the film in 2003 that the complete version was made accessible to the average US viewer.

Like the title of the film itself, many of the characters in *Warriors* bear names different from their *Nausicaä* counterparts. The Ohmu are rebranded as Gorgons.<sup>2</sup> Many of the secondary characters have new names, too: Kushana is Queen Selena; Pejite is Placeda; Tolmekia is Tolmekula; Prince Asbel of Pejite is Prince Milo. But most significantly, Nausicaä is renamed Princess Zandra in the film. This arbitrary name change removes an important subtext of the title: Miyazaki was inspired by the figure of Nausicaä from Greek mythology, and he molded his character by combining her story from *The Odyssey* with a Japanese tale from the eleventh century about a princess who loved insects more than her fellow human beings.<sup>3</sup>

On the face of it, the differences between *Warriors of the Wind* and *Nausicaä* seem slight. Name changes aside, the basic plot outlined above remains the same. But the changes are significant when we consider how they alter the pacifistic and ecological messages of the original text. Princess Zandra is referred to as a “warrior” throughout the film, and the tone is more straightforwardly belligerent; this is clearly reflected in the title. In an opening sequence when she saves her uncle Lord Yupa from an enraged Ohmu attack, Zandra patronizes and infantilizes the giant insect in the *Warriors* version, referring to it as a “boy.” Thus, in an early moment of characterization, editors removed one of Nausicaä’s defining features, her empathy, and replaced it with Zandra’s condescension. However, the most damaging and extensive cut excises a key scene in *Nausicaä* that takes place in a secret laboratory at the bottom of her castle. Lord Yupa comes across her sprawled over her desk, sleeping, in a room filled with harmless blooming plants from the Toxic Jungle. She explains to him that the water she draws to irrigate these plants comes from deep underground and is pure, leading her to believe that the tox-

icity of the water in the topsoil poisons and mutates the jungle plants. Removing this scene effectively estranges Nausicaä from her mission (in the Japanese version) of studying the origin of the jungle. Cutting this scene has the added effect of presenting the Toxic Jungle as an inscrutable, aggressive, colonizing force that has no biological, zoological, or ecological imperative on its own; in *Warriors* the jungle is a faceless anti-human entity that should legitimately be confronted with force.

This deliberate pruning of green concerns from the Japanese film for American audiences is not without precedent. Indeed, Japan's biggest postwar cinematic export, the *kaiju* film *Gojira* (1954), would be similarly neutered of its antinuke environmental critique when it was rereleased as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* in 1956. This later version made the monster popular with global audiences and spawned many other *kaiju* films in its wake, but it also silenced any ecological considerations from the monster film and removed the sting of the film's anti-Americanism as well.

How, then, do we make sense of the way these two films, separated by thirty years, endured a process of rewriting and adaptation that effectively amounted to a process of censorship and were censored for largely the same reasons? Radically reducing each film's environmental critique also meant turning both films into superficial, cartoonish entertainment palatable for Americans. Allusions to the use of atomic weapons and the social and environmental degradation that resulted from these weapons were simply left on the editing floor or lost in translation, effectively sidestepping a central point of postwar contention between Japan and the United States. In the 1950s, this editorial decision undermined the ecological urgency of *Gojira*, a movie about the avenger of an angry earth; *Godzilla*, the sanitized version, is a flat monster movie featuring a man in a rubber suit destroying mock-up toy Tokyos. In the early 1980s, *Nausicaä* endured a more subtle cutting. In *Warriors of the Wind*, Zandra is Americanized: powerful, militaristic, vengeful. She has, at best, an uneven empathy for the lesser creatures of the planet; and she relies on her strength, rather than her intellect and empathy, to save the day. Zandra's sacrifice at the end of the film is messianic—the Christ figure martyrs herself and then rises to “tie the strings of the earth together” (the key phrase from the prophecy in *Warriors*), fulfilling a recognizably American dream: under her tutelage, the valley becomes the moral leader of the rest of the world.

And yet in spite of the mangling of *Nausicaä* for an American audience, I also argue that we should look to the extended manga series, rather than the original anime, to find Miyazaki's most trenchant ecological and moral critiques. The manga would continue well after the film's release, finally concluding in 1994. He pursued this project to complicate the rather straightforward savior narrative that emerges in the anime. In hindsight, the religious overtones of the fulfilled prophecy bothered Miyazaki: he didn't want to make the scene of her resurrection a "religious painting."<sup>4</sup> In order to undo this religiosity, he continues *Nausicaä's* journey in the manga, allowing for greater character development and a much richer and nuanced ecological critique. She encounters a race of people living deep within the Sea of Decay (the name used for the Toxic Jungle in the manga); discovers a fellow traveler whose powers give her a direct psychic link with all living things; continually tests her resolve against the use of violence; and even adopts the last living God Warrior as her own child for a time toward the manga's climax.<sup>5</sup>

In the film, the Ohmu are aggressive herd animals whose sole mission is to protect and extend the jungle so that it can continue to purify the earth. This facet of the film was problematic for Miyazaki, as it is a naïve perspective, one rooted in mankind's inability to engage nature on its own terms. Our constant need to anthropomorphize and to look for rational causality and moral behavior in natural events estranges us further from it. In fact, he claims to have used a fungal setting full of bizarre insects in both the anime and the manga to frustrate the potential for his audience to recognize and identify with the environment and its denizens; he sought viewer estrangement rather than identification.<sup>6</sup> In *Nausicaä*, mankind's estrangement extends even to the nature of the Toxic Jungle, or Sea of Decay: the mycological dynamic implies rot, an uncontrollable rhizomatic decay that invisibly takes root and eats through the remains of man's artificial environments. A regular jungle can be burned, tamed, colonized, reordered, and turned into a garden; *Nausicaä* effectively does this in her hidden room, where pure water (and, presumably, love and understanding) renders the plants safe and beautiful. But in the manga, the Sea of Decay revolts against mankind's arrogance and hubris at even the cellular level.

Building on this philosophy, Miyazaki reveals late in the manga series that the Sea of Decay and all the gigantic insects in it were deliberately created by mankind with the intention to purify the earth of their

earlier mistakes. The kingdom responsible for this awaits a purified future in order to recolonize the planet and reassert its dominion over the earth, the same hubris that started the Seven Days of Fire. However, the Sea of Decay quickly evolves away from its intended purpose, and the insects became more aggressive to mankind, pursuing, as it were, their own species' being.

Miyazaki's instructive decision to depart from the anime's simplistic tendencies—anthropomorphizing the Ohmu and giving the Toxic Jungle a supposedly redemptive mission—is perhaps the most ecologically nuanced perspective in the entire *Nausicaä* universe. This decision seems to diminish the anime's greenest qualities: in the film, nature has the capacity to defend itself, both vigorously and righteously, and it also has the capacity to redeem itself if given the right stewardship. But the question of stewardship—even under someone as ecologically considerate and empathetic as Nausicaä—is the real problem. For as Miyazaki says, “The idea that nature is always gentle and will give birth to something like the Sea of Decay in order to restore an environment polluted by humans is a total lie. And I believe that the idea that we should cling to such a saccharine worldview is a big problem.”<sup>7</sup> Later, he states this more bluntly: “Ecosystems can't possibly exist for a particular purpose.”<sup>8</sup> He recognizes that the drive to rationalize behavior in other organisms is a kind of paternalism that is part and parcel of the same mentality that eventually gives rise to mankind's more destructive behavior, and he uses the *Nausicaä* series to both explore and ultimately undermine that perspective. This, more than anything else, is Miyazaki's boldest, greenest message.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Nathaniel Heggins Bryant** earned his PhD in critical and cultural studies from the University of Pittsburgh (2014), where he dissertated on US prison writing as intellectual labor. He recently relocated to Northern California, where he will be serving as a part-time lecturer at Butte College and California State University, Chico, teaching literature and composition courses. His review of *Nausicaä*—which he hopes to extend in a full-length article in the near future—is his first foray into environmental or ecological criticism; he is also in the earliest stages of beginning a project on the genealogy of green concerns in heavy metal music.

## NOTES

1. For further reading, consult DeWeese-Boyd, “*Shōjo Savior*”; Wright, “Forest Spirits, Giant Insects and World Trees”; and Mayumi, Solomon, and Chang, “Ecological and Consumption Themes of the Films of Hayao Miyazaki.”

2. It is quite possible that the word Ohmu, which sounds like “Ohm,” is actually a nod to the blue-skinned alien creatures named Om in the important French animated film *Fantastic Planet* (*La planète sauvage*, 1973, directed by René Laloux).

3. Miyazaki, “On *Nausicaä*,” 283.

4. Miyazaki, “Nature Is Both Generous, and Ferocious,” 333.

5. In the manga, the God Warrior is not used against the herd of Ohmu that almost invades the valley. Instead, the warrior is allowed to grow and develop. Eventually, upon its birth, it recognizes *Nausicaä* as its mother, and she leads it to the heart of Dorok, the other great kingdom that wars with Tolmekia. There, she uses it to help discover the origin of the Sea of Decay and employs its nuclear power to destroy Dorok.

6. Miyazaki, “Earth’s Environment,” 416.

7. Miyazaki, “On the Banks,” 169.

8. Miyazaki, “On the Banks,” 170.

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