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Mushishi

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Mushishi, an episodic anime television series (2005–2006) directed by Hiroshi Nagahama and adapted from the manga series (1999–2008) by Yuki Urushibara, explores the ecological relationship between humans and *mushi* (literally, “insect”), supernatural life-forms whose reliance on humans as hosts impacts human life by mimicking a variety of biological phenomena ranging from swamps to microbes. Invisible to most humans, *mushi* are diagnosed as cohabiting with human communities by a *mushishi* (literally, “Insect Master”), a gifted seer of *mushi* who is able to eradicate their harmful varieties. Set in Japan during the 1800s, the series depicts the relationship of *mushi* to humans against the landscapes of Japan’s premodern forests.

Today, *mushi* refers to bugs and insects; however, in *Mushishi* the more complex kanji (Chinese character) is used for *mushi* (蟲), which indicates that they are not actual insects but mythic, ubiquitous, and potentially monstrous life-forms. Resembling actual insects, microbes, and protozoa, they are generally extremely small yet diverse, elusive, and highly adaptable. The *mushi* introduced in the anime are largely invisible, shapeless, or shape-shifting and invade, impact, and interact with humans in varied ways.¹

In the first episode of the anime series, Ginko, the series’ only recurring character, explains to a boy the genealogical filiation humans have with the mysterious processions of plankton-like creatures he has been seeing, by using his hand as an analogy: “Let’s say these four fingers represent animal life and your thumb is plant life.” Pointing to the tip of his middle finger, Ginko continues:

Humans are here, at the point furthest from your heart. . . . The farther you go down on your palm from there, the lower the life-forms become. As you continue to go lower, around your wrist, your blood vessels combine into one. . . . Fungi and organisms would be here. Once you come to that point, it becomes difficult to distinguish between plant and animal life. Yet there is life still past that point.

Ginko runs his thumb up along his arm, past his shoulder, stopping near his heart: “And the life that is around here is called ‘mushi’ or ‘green matter.’”

Ginko’s use of his hand to visualize the remote lineage of humans from mushi is not without significance for the first episode’s storyline. For one thing, whereas mushi are invisible to most humans, the intimacy of the hand in its mediation of human experience of the routine of everyday life, especially through handheld objects, is peculiar to Shinra’s ability to create mushi life-forms through pictographic calligraphy. But Ginko’s living, branching human-sized analogy for species categorization also conjures up the iconic tree of evolution from late-nineteenth-century Western science that drew on the phylogenetic trees Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel explored as heuristic aids for conveying the filiation of biological life from a common ancestral source.² The use of a fleshy, venous analogy with humans at the peripheral vessels and mushi close to the heart, as if to some primal past, establishes how mushi, despite their lack of genealogical proximity to humans, can still physiologically affect humans due to their biological continuity. Hence, mushi are essentially parasitical, invasive with the capacity to consume human bodies from the inside and sometimes replace them.

The depiction of this bodily takeover is often eerie, yet the ways mushi infect humans are, in fact, realistic and scientific, analogous even to parasitoid bees and wasps. *Mushishi* portrays victimized humans’ susceptibility to external life-forms. Barriers between humans and nonhumans are not solid but permeable. Underlying this representation is a Japanese animistic belief and mythology that perceives humans as equal to nonhumans (either organic or nonorganic). Mushi are not depicted as innately malicious, but they are injurious to humans for their own survival. Their interactions with humans thus visualize the complex and often ironic predator-prey ecosystem wherein humans

end up as prey for the smallest microorganism. *Mushishi* thus adopts a nonanthropocentric, more holistic position, somewhat similar to an eco-Gothic approach to the environment.³

Moreover, in terms of its content, characterization and ecological perspectives *Mushishi* makes for intriguing comparisons with Hayao Miyazaki's anime feature film *Kaze no tani no Nausicaä* (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, hereafter *Nausicaä*).⁴ Both narratives exploit ambiguous representations of mushi and fungi. Shapeless or shape-shifting, parasitical and instinctive, mushi in *Mushishi* are a stark contrast to the majestic, intelligent, and spiritual *Ōmu* (literally, "King insect," using the same kanji as *mushi*) in *Nausicaä*. The miasmal effects of mushi in *Mushishi*, however, are reminders of the deadly role of the snowy spores and the toxic gas of the *Fukai* (literally, "rotten sea") in *Nausicaä*. In the latter, the *Fukai*, the poisonous fungi forest, is born and expands from the numerous dead bodies of gigantic *Ōmu* and other insects similar to some mushi in *Mushishi*.

The two stories demonstrate distinctive characteristics, mostly in contrasting ways. *Mushishi* is episodic and focuses on Ginko, a lonely adult man whose itinerant commitment to eradicating or pacifying harmful mushi has him mediating between humans and mushi in pre-modern rural Japan. His otherness is marked with his green eyes, silver hair, and Western clothes. Rich, colorful greens permeate the anime, representing the lush ecosystem with nostalgic ambience prior to Japan's industrialization. In contrast, *Nausicaä* is a girl fighter and leader of her community, living with others, humans and nonhumans alike. The world of *Nausicaä* is lucid, adorned by clear blue. Despite the contrast, both protagonists share qualities that are spiritual, empathetic, and scientific. They both play roles of mediators between humans and nonhumans, trying to sustain coexistence in a given, fragile ecosystem.

Further, both narratives visualize the profound damages that we keep causing to our own environment, including our own bodies. *Nausicaä* depicts a futuristic dystopia wherein the remaining humans suffer under the influence of the toxic *Fukai*, which is in fact human-made to purify the polluted ecosystem due to the devastating outcomes of wars involving advanced technologies. What it dramatizes is not only the devastation humans have caused to nature but also the futility of human's insatiable greed, which has caused adversity to humans themselves.

Despite its lush green and nostalgic ambience, *Mushishi* presents a vision that is perhaps more relevant to us today than does *Nausicaä*. Numerous and diverse mushi in the series resemble microbes and so act as reminders of increasing issues with viruses, as exemplified by antimicrobial resistances. *Mushishi*'s somewhat secluded scenery and Ginko's lonely and endless journey convey a sense of apathy, indicating fear of malicious microbes and our inability to harmoniously coexist with non-humans as an integral part of nature. The series invites us to reconsider what an ecosystem means. It is not external to humans but internal as well. *Mushishi*, therefore, makes for compelling allegorization of the intricate, profound, and ambiguous interrelationships between humans and their surroundings in ways that uncannily reflect how, as Tylor elucidates, "the human is never separate and closed in on itself but is always implicated in open systems and structures that expose it to dimensions of alterity that disrupt stability and displace identity."⁵

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mio Bryce is head of Japanese studies in the Department of International Studies: Languages and Cultures at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. She is the author of more than thirty articles and book chapters on topics that range from teaching and learning Japanese as a second language to children's literature to anime and manga as integral to youth identity and youth cultures. Her teaching of Japanese language, literature, and manga and anime—including the courses *Manga and Japanese Contemporary Culture* and *Manga and Anime as Global Imagery*—aim at capturing and magnifying undergraduate students' passion for Japanese culture and language. Mio's research interests are wide ranging yet always centered on human relationships with self, others, and their surroundings. She perceives particular significance for fiction in Japan as an effective medium for individuals to express their views and concerns, such as ecological issues, which otherwise are easily suppressed in a society where conformity and contextual appropriation prevail. Mio was recently the recipient of a research grant to support exploring the potential for establishing a volunteer program to assist with supporting Japan after the Great East Earthquake.

Jason Davis has been involved since 2004 with teaching anime and manga to undergraduate students as part of Japanese studies in the Department of International Studies: Languages and Cultures at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. These courses have been a popular attraction for nontraditional humanities students—such as international, science, and business students—and especially for undergraduates with English as a second language.

The exploration of ecological themes and issues in anime has been a component of a course taught every year aimed at introducing undergraduate students to contemporary Japanese society through popular culture. Among Jason's publications are contributions to Open Court's Popular Culture and Philosophy series of books—including coauthoring chapters in Anime and Philosophy: Wide Eyed Wonder, edited by Josef Steiff and Tristan D. Tamplin (2010), and Manga and Philosophy: Full Metal Metaphysician, edited by Josef Steiff and Adam Barkman (2010)—as well as an overview of manga genres in Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods (New York: Continuum, 2010).

NOTES

1. For further reading on the anime series *Mushishi* see Jackson, "Space between Worlds"; Anderson, "Powers of (Dis)Ability"; and Okuyama, "Eclectic Myths in *Mushi-shi* (2006) and Cyborg Mythology of *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004)."
2. Archibald, *Aristotle's Ladder, Darwin's Tree*.
3. See Principe, "EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century."
4. See Bryce and Plumb, "*Mushishi*."
5. Taylor, "Refiguring the Human," 3.

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