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My Neighbor Totoro

The Healing of Nature, the Nature of Healing

KOSUKE FUJIKI

Originally released in 1988, Hayao Miyazaki's fourth feature film, *My Neighbor Totoro*, could, in retrospect, be viewed as heralding the prominence of healing in the popular culture of Japan in the 1990s. During that decade, healing charms and incenses that would purportedly soothe one's weary spirit were popular among younger generations; racks of new age and easy-listening CDs were recategorized as "healing music"; and VHS rental shops offered an assembly of "healing movies"—films that were set against bucolic provincial backdrops and carried an emotional storyline capable of producing a cathartic effect. Such films would include *Powder* (directed by Victor Salva in 1995) and *Phenomenon* (directed by John Turteltaub in 1996)—both set in US small towns surrounded by woods and pastures—as well as *Nabbie's Love* (directed by Yuji Nakae in 1999), a Japanese film that showcased the lavish natural beauty of an island in Okinawa, the southernmost archipelago in Japan. Those who could afford to do so also escaped from urban areas in order to indulge in the healing practices available at a growing forest of resort hotels overlooking gleaming subtropical seas that year by year are being depleted of their sustainable resources. Appearing at the zenith of Japanese people's satisfaction and complacency with the country's economic achievements and just prior to the collapsing of the bubble economy, *My Neighbor Totoro* offered a utopian portrayal of 1950s rural scenes that stirred the viewers' imagination through the beauty, the power, and the simplicity of its representation of nature. The film appealed both to the young, who were unfamiliar with the film's setting,

and to their parents and grandparents, who felt nostalgia for what Japan had lost during the past few decades in the quest of a prosperous future.

As with Miyazaki's other works, *My Neighbor Totoro* is notable for portraying the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature by drawing effectively on the imagery of Japan's animistic religious traditions as well as by inventing adorable fictional creatures living in the dark forests and the cobwebbed corners of abandoned homes. Most significant, however, is that the characters gain spiritual comfort and healing through their encounters with nature and its nonhuman inhabitants. This is a theme that the filmmaker would explore and develop in his later works. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997) the Forest Spirit heals the wounds of the protagonist, Ashitaka, even though the forest itself is under threat of human deforestation. In *The Wind Rises* (2013) the characters seek in nature the healing of physical illness and psychological traumas. The airplane designer Jiro, who had been mentally traumatized by an unsuccessful test flight, retreats to a verdant country resort where the film's heroine, Naoko, a tubercular patient, sojourns to maintain her precarious health.

In *My Neighbor Totoro* the theme of the healing powers of nature is played out through the illness of the mother of the film's two protagonists, Satsuki and her younger sister, Mei. As one critic points out, the mother plays a central role in the narrative, despite her few on-screen appearances, by being the motivation for the actions of the main characters.¹ The story opens with the family's relocating to the countryside to be near the mother, who is hospitalized in a rural village, apparently for recuperation from tuberculosis. Rural areas surrounded by nature are often considered supportive to convalescence from long-term illnesses because of the slower pace of life, the clean air and water, the availability of fresh local produce, and the peaceful and tranquil atmosphere. As the film progresses, nature is recognized as offering not only physical healing but also the healing of psychological ailments. The seemingly jovial behavior of the sisters during the first half of the film is later revealed to have been their coping behavior in face of their mother's absence; news of deterioration of their mother's condition visibly exposes their repressed anxieties. Little Mei, who had often been dependent on her sister, responds by attempting to provide help on her own through delivering an ear of corn to her mother at the hospital, believing wholeheartedly that it would magically cure her disease. The

corn is from the garden of Granny, a local woman who has told the sisters that her vegetables will “do [their mother] wonders,” for “they’ve soaked up lots of vitamins and sunshine.”² Both Granny and Mei clearly exhibit faith in the healing power of nature.

Although Granny looks after the two girls in the absence of their parents, it is nature in the guise of the supernatural creatures that is able to enchant and excite the two sisters, delivering joy and wonder at moments wherein stress and anxiety might normally threaten children. For example, when the family arrive at their new residence, the sisters’ discovery of soot sprites in the dark corners of the old house dispels the anxiety of moving into a strange house and replaces it with the excitement of exploring a “haunted house.”³ Moreover, critics have noted that, in the film, the large Totoro serves as a substitute for the absent mother, as the tactile comfort of the monster’s soft and cuddly fur provides the sisters with the sense of lying against their mother’s bosom.⁴ Satsuki’s first encounter with the large Totoro occurs one night when the two girls are waiting for their father’s return at a lonesome bus stop. Carrying sleepy Mei piggyback and standing for hours in the rain must be exhausting, yet Satsuki brightens up as soon as the big monster appears beside her and keeps her company. Later, at the film’s most unsettling moment when Mei becomes lost while on her way to the hospital, Satsuki goes to the lair of the Totoros in the woods to ask their help in finding her. The large Totoro summons Catbus, which takes her to Mei and then gives the two girls a thrilling ride to the hospital. These examples of comfort and help that Miyazaki’s friendly supernatural creatures offer to the protagonists epitomize the human characters’ peaceful coexistence within their natural surroundings.

Nevertheless, the film subtly conveys the understanding that this idea of coexistence with nature is not solely Miyazaki’s creation but derives substantially from the Japanese spiritual tradition. Religious iconography—including Torii, Buddhist statues of Jizo (Ksitigarbha), and statues of the Shinto fox-god Inari—can be found throughout the film, and the fact that the Totoros reside inside a sacred camphor tree suggests that these fictional beings should be regarded as a new addition to this religious constellation. The film’s allusion to Japan’s Shinto beliefs, which are merged indistinguishably with Buddhism, is not for promoting a state religion that divinizes the imperial family as descendants of the sun-goddess Amaterasu but for embedding into everyday

practice the value of the ancient folk animism that shows reverence for nature, predicating that humans are living under the protection of deities in nature. Repeatedly, the characters often seek help from and show their gratitude to divinities: Satsuki asks a statue of Jizo if she and her sister may take shelter from the rain in the roofed shrine; the father takes the sisters to the camphor tree to express gratitude for their smooth settlement in the village; Granny says a Buddhist chant to pray for Mei's safety when the child sets out for the hospital on her own; and Mei rests by the side of six statues of Jizo when she realizes that she is completely lost. By identifying divinity in every aspect of nature, the Shinto tradition advocates both respect and discretion toward nature, and it encourages people to be grateful for the blessings bestowed by the natural environment.

Significantly, however, Miyazaki does more than simply allude to Japan's spiritual tradition; he reconfigures that tradition in the context of modern environmental concerns. As Antonia Levi maintains in reference to *Princess Mononoke*, Shinto's animist view of nature differs considerably from the philosophy behind today's environmental movements.⁵ Shinto positions humans as having little control over nature. With human life at the mercy of the will of the gods, the most that humans can do is to appease them with rituals and prayers in order to avoid the wrath of gods appearing in the form of natural disasters. Modern environmental concerns, by contrast, stem from the notion that humans have foolishly exercised too much control over nature, so much so that nature is now endangered. In contrast to Shinto's awe of nature, Levi argues, "environmentalism fears humanity, not nature."⁶ While continuing to present nature as a site of healing, Miyazaki has, increasingly in his later films, such as *Princess Mononoke*, been putting focus on how humans have estranged themselves from their natural environment or have endangered the ecological harmony, especially as a consequence of their wars and their desire for development.

Yet in the case of *My Neighbor Totoro*, the idea of estrangement from nature is not so much inscribed in the film text as in its context. Japan's economic bubble at the end of the 1980s was the tipping point of the country's steady economic growth since the end of World War II, with people beginning to question their devotion to work and economic prosperity. According to Tatsuya Yumiyama, this reconsideration of social values was what paved the way for Japan's healing fad in the 1990s.⁷

Having achieved unprecedented material affluence, many Japanese started to realize the value of what they had left behind during their struggles to support the country's relentless pursuit of modernity. As a result, people came to have a "longing . . . for the state prior to [their] confrontation with nature, a state of repose in Mother Nature's bosom."⁸ In light of the past decades of development and urbanization, the film's portrayal of 1950s village life in harmony with nature was therefore nostalgic or even utopian for many people who were no longer in contact with natural landscapes in everyday life. The expansive, furry belly of Totoro was a reminder of the comforts that may have been lost.

What was crucially lacking in the healing fad of 1990s Japan was a perspective of what we can give to nature, not simply what we can take from it. The commercial hype for physical and spiritual healing can therefore be seen as another form of exploitation of the natural environment. In order to go one step beyond nostalgia and a longing for utopian harmony with nature, *My Neighbor Totoro* should be seen with its historical contexts taken into account. The popularity of the film symptomatically reveals the bleakness of modern human life with its estrangement from the gifts of nature, thereby making us aware that the peaceful rural life presented in the film is in fact under threat of disappearance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kosuke Fujiki is a PhD candidate in film studies at King's College London, currently completing his thesis on the Okinawan cinema of the 1980s and the 1990s. With his research interests ranging from East Asian cinema to memory and history in film, he has presented his work at international conferences and has published three articles in the Japanese film journal *Cinema Studies*, one of which received in 2011 an annual award from the Japanese Society for Cinema Studies. He also works as an English-Japanese translator, specializing in film subtitling.

NOTES

1. Cavallaro, *Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, 73.
2. *My Neighbor Totoro*.
3. *My Neighbor Totoro*.
4. For example, see Okuhara, "Walking Along with Nature."
5. Levi, "New Myths for the Millennium," 41.
6. Levi, "New Myths for the Millennium," 41.

7. Yumiyama, "Varieties of Healing in Present-Day Japan," 279.
8. Yumiyama, "Varieties of Healing in Present-Day Japan," 277.

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