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Nature Spirits as Intermediaries in the
Animation of Hayao Miyazaki

CHRIS G. HALL

Humanity has used art as a means of expressing its connection with the more-than-human world since the Paleolithic. For evidence, one need look no further than the famous cave paintings of Lascaux, France, dated between 15,000 and 17,000 BCE. Moreover, the earliest instances of human self-expression, whether in visual media such as cave paintings or the corpus of the oral tradition, demonstrate a recurring celebration of humankind's connection with the natural world. Nowhere are such expressions more evident than in the mythologies and folklores of traditional societies living in close and reciprocal relationship with the land. One fascinating aspect of the connection between humanity and nature found across geographical and temporal boundaries is the human need for intermediary between the human-self and a nature that is at once both *self* and *other*. Commonly, such entities take the form of spirit beings, often anthropomorphic characters whose physical forms are caught halfway between the human and the more-than-human and who represent the tendency to put a human face on the nonhuman. Examples include the shape-shifting magicians of the Celts (e.g., Amergin of Irish lore); the anthropomorphic animal presences of indigenous North Americans (e.g., Coyote); and the Shinto *kami*, spirits or gods that represent aspects of nature (e.g., kami of rivers or mountains). Ancient stories concerning animal spirits have passed from the

preliterate to the literate and, most recently, into the digital. The screen has taken the place of the hearth fire; instead of listening to the stories of elders told by firelight, we turn our attention to glittering screens, to CGI blockbusters, must-see TV, and memetic video clips. However, the fundamental human need for connection with the natural is neither lost to antiquity nor limited to those few who carry on ancient storytelling traditions. This review celebrates three films, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*, by Hayao Miyazaki, a filmmaker who masterfully weaves the threads of traditional Japanese spirituality with a contemporary bioregional ethic into inspiring animated tales of connection and communion with the more-than-human world. Often in Miyazaki's films, spirit beings play the fundamental role of enabling such connection and communion by bridging the gap between the human and more-than-human worlds.

My Neighbor Totoro (*Tonari no Totoro*), released in 1988 and the earliest of the three aforementioned films, is relatively (if deceptively) simple in narrative and aesthetic structure. Decidedly simplified, line-drawn cartoonish characters move against a backdrop of intricately detailed watercolor backgrounds to convey a story of childhood discovery and the wondrous, rejuvenating power of connecting with nature. The hand-drawn animation of *Tonari no Totoro*, like all of Miyazaki's films (in an interview he states that he never uses more than 10 percent CGI), creates a surprisingly captivating and mimetic anime that holds enduring charm for adults and children alike.¹ The continued production of *Totoro* merchandise, the two separate translations into English (one in 1993 and one in 2006), and the large number of active fan sites devoted to the film attest to its abiding appeal. No small part of this appeal owes to the way the film "represents a complex interaction between humans, non-human nature, sacred elements, and supernatural creatures."²

At the heart of this interaction is the iconic and eponymous figure of Totoro—a catlike animal spirit who dwells in the woods near the protagonists' home. Totoro evokes the nature spirit of traditional Japanese religion, while simultaneously being something new, an invention of Miyazaki's rooted in the sense of wonder and connection to the land found in traditional Japanese religion.³ Miyazaki cleverly links the natural with a sense of childlike wonder by grounding the story in the point of view of the young female protagonists, Mei and Satsuki. Significantly, the younger of the two girls (Mei) first sees Totoro. It is through Mei's

encounter with Totoro that the two girls experience both wonder and appreciation for the natural world as well as experiences that seem to go beyond the natural. For example, in a nighttime ritual, Mei and Satsuki dance and gesticulate alongside three manifestations of Totoro in a quasi-ritualistic dance that causes seeds the girls have planted to grow into enormous trees. Later, the two ride on Catbus, which is summoned by Totoro; and it is only through Totoro's intervention that the lost Mei finds her way home.

Others have commented on Miyazaki's emphasis on the childlike and the wondrous.⁴ Miyazaki's own commentary on the film reveals a longing for a sense of deep ecological experience that borders on the mystical, a type of experience he seems to see as most readily available to the very young: "Well, yes. I believe that children's souls are the inheritors of historical memory from previous generations. It's just that as they grow older and experience the everyday world that memory sinks lower and lower. I feel I need to make a film that reaches down to that level. If I could do that I would die happy."⁵ In *Tonari no Toro*, one of his earliest films, Miyazaki has arguably already fulfilled his greatest artistic aspiration.

Princess Mononoke (*Mononoke-hime*) is more complex than *Totoro*, in terms of its narrative and artistic composition as well as its commentary on the connection of the human to the more-than-human. Far more than a simple tale of childhood discovery and wonder, *Princess Mononoke* explores such complicated issues as industrialization and subsequent deforestation, indigenous versus nonindigenous perspectives, and the plight of the impoverished in rigidly hierarchical societies. Again, at the heart of these various tensions, one finds spirit beings who act as intermediaries, linking the human and more-than-human worlds. The opening scene states in no uncertain terms the importance of these spirit beings and the film's ecological message:

In ancient times, the land lay covered in forests, where, from ages long past, dwelt the spirits of the gods. Back then, man and beast lived in harmony, but as time went by, most of the great forests were destroyed.⁶

This opening narrative introduces a tension between the human and more-than-human worlds, a tension conveyed through the main characters' struggles and—significantly—through the actions of spirit beings with whom they interact. Indeed, the human characters' at-

titudes and treatment of the various *mononoke* (nature spirits) reflect their overall attitude and treatment of the natural world. Early in the film, viewers meet a Tatari Gami (Boar God) named Nagy, a being that the character Ashitaka and his people, the Emishi, seem to both fear and respect. The Emishi's fear quickly proves justified, as Nagy charges toward the town, threatening to raze the village and trample its inhabitants. It turns out that Nagy has been driven mad by a wound from an iron bullet. The iron has corrupted the natural power of the forest embodied by the Tatari Gami and corrupts Ashitaka in turn when he is wounded in his encounter with the boar. The wounded Nagy embodies the film's central conflict: iron—a product of industry—has injured the connection between humans and nonhuman nature, and this injury extends to the nonhuman and human as represented by Nagy's corrupted form and Ashitaka's wound, respectively.

In the course of his journey across Japan to seek healing and renewal at the hands of the Shishigami (Forest God), Ashitaka encounters many characters whose lifeways differ from those of the Emishi and whose relationships with nature spirits embody key cultural differences. A prime example is the industrialist Lady Eboshi, whose Irontown settlement created the bullet that corrupted the boar spirit Nagy. Eboshi's attitude toward nature is exploitative and anthropocentric—the epitome of the corrupting influence of industry on the relationship between humanity and nonhuman nature. In contrast and in opposition to Lady Eboshi stands the film's title character, Princess Mononoke, who is herself part wolf and part human. Mononoke's hybridity places her in the liminal space between the human and the more-than-human; and like Ashitaka, she plays an intermediary role between the two worlds. Bent on the expansion of industry, Lady Eboshi and the penurious refugees of Irontown continue to harvest timber from the Forest God's realm, an act that brings Eboshi and Mononoke into direct conflict. The culminating moment of this conflict comes when Lady Eboshi beheads the Shishigami with her gun. In the end, Miyazaki seems to reinforce the ecological message with which the film began, but he does so without oversimplifying the plight of the poor and disenfranchised human characters of the tale. While Eboshi plays the villain, she simultaneously plays benefactor to the mostly sympathetic inhabitants of Irontown. In short, the film's ending is likely to leave viewers with mixed feelings: on one hand, the humans restore their connection to the land by re-

turning the Forest God's head to his body; on the other hand, the forest spirit is not brought magically back to life. Instead, his essence seems to diffuse and merge with the forest floor, suggesting that humans can live in some sort of reciprocity with nature but that the human presence in the more-than-human world leaves both changed forever. Further, as others have pointed out, "the adult world of industry that is represented by Lady Eboshi has not been eliminated."⁷ However complex and unresolved, it is clear that Miyazaki wrote *Mononoke* with an ecological message in mind. As he stated in an interview following the film's production, "I've come to the point where I just can't make a movie without addressing the problem of humanity as part of an ecosystem."⁸

If the Catbus and giant boar of the first two films are not strange enough fare, *Spirited Away* offers a feast of wonderfully bizarre characters and situations certain to please even those whose tastes tend toward the most outlandish. In the film's opening scene, the protagonist, Chihiro, reveals her petulance by expressing her displeasure about relocating to a new and unfamiliar home, but her journey into the unknown is only just beginning. Before reaching their destination, her parents stop at an abandoned amusement park, where they feast on a banquet laid out mysteriously before them; and as a result of their gluttony, it seems, they transform into pigs. Frightened by this transformation, Chihiro flees and soon finds herself stepping through the looking glass into an otherworld where virtually everything is new and unfamiliar. In what many have called a coming-of-age tale, Chihiro meets several spirit beings, from the slender male youth Master Haku to her half-human boss Kamaji, who provides Chihiro with a job feeding coal to the ever-hungry steam boiler in the bathhouse of the cruel witch Yubaba. Through hard work and diligence, Chihiro manages to escape the strange world of Yubaba's bathhouse and reunite with her parents, who reassume their human forms. But while it might seem easy to accept this story as a simple bildungsroman about personal responsibility and the dangers of overconsumption, the film contains powerful (if understated) ecological wisdom as well. Indeed, *Spirited Away* is about accepting responsibility, not solely for oneself in the narrowest sense, but for one's self as part of a broader land *community* in Aldo Leopold's sense of the word, one that includes the rivers, the flora, and the fauna—the sum of all sustaining relationships.⁹

As others have pointed out, the film's ecological message becomes

most evident in two key interactions: in Chihiro's cleansing of a stink spirit (who she discovers is a spirit of a local river polluted by waste) and in her rejection of the offerings of gold from the strange spirit No-Face.¹⁰ By taking responsibility and eschewing excessive consumption and greed, Chihiro discovers the effects of a new housing development's waste on the local watershed and teaches the spirit No-Face to value more than material wealth. Moreover, Chihiro learns these lessons herself as part of her coming-of-age. And yet again, spirit beings play the powerful role of intermediary between the human protagonist and the world beyond the merely human.

Though his stories take the form of animated films, Miyazaki's work reveals insights into the humanity-nature relationship found in cultures throughout the world since the earliest record of the oral tradition—namely, the importance of wonder, connection, and responsibility toward the more-than-human world. Indeed, the power of his films owes much to Miyazaki's heartfelt celebration of connections between humanity and nature and of art as a means of expressing those connections. Yet he never resorts to proselytizing or simplistic, didactic storytelling to force an environmentalist agenda; instead, ecological wisdom and veneration of nature, often embodied by spirit beings, constitutes an essential and organic feature of Miyazaki's masterpieces. Seen in this light, his work holds a valuable lesson for modernity and the West. Embedded within the Western intellectual tradition—and perhaps for fear of appearing childish, simplistic, or retrogressive—those writing in the environmental humanities often clad basic but essential insights regarding connections between humanity and nonhuman nature in the needlessly intricate raiment of abstraction and fancy language. The sometimes-inflated diction and rigid ideology of much ecocriticism, in fact, stands in stark contrast to Miyazaki's ethos of humble embodiment and dynamic reverence for the natural world. It is my sincere hope that the environmental humanities can learn from Miyazaki's example, dressing down to simpler digs and focusing on a veneration of nature rooted in wonder, connection, and a sense of responsibility. For no matter how complex the problems of the current environmental crisis may be, simple, earnest delight in the natural world remains a vital part of solving such problems. In reflecting on Miyazaki's works, one is reminded of a quote attributed to a Shinto priest who, when asked about his ideology and theology, said, "We do not have ideology. We

do not have theology. We dance.”¹¹ Those in the West, and particularly those working in the environmental humanities, might do well to learn a few moves from master storyteller Hayao Miyazaki, to remember that what lies at the heart of our work is a childlike sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural world, a feeling that transcends the logos and is as simple and wonderful as dancing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris G. Hall *transplanted from the Bitterroot Valley of Montana to the Yuba-Sierra bioregion in 1977 at the ripe age of one. He was raised in Nevada County, California, and educated first at Sierra College and later at Humboldt State University, where he majored in creative writing and teaching of writing. Chris made the conscious decision to return to his home ground in Nevada County after learning and teaching in Humboldt County for nearly a decade. He currently teaches English composition and literature at Sierra College as well as working in the writing center and advising the NCC Ecologically Conscious Organization of Students (ECOS).*

NOTES

1. Miyazaki, “A God among Animators.”
2. Stibbe, “Zen and the Art of Environmental Education,” 474.
3. McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki*, 122.
4. Mayumi, Solomon, and Chang, “Ecological and Consumption Themes of the Films of Hayao Miyazaki,” 2.
5. Miyazaki, “A God among Animators.”
6. *Spirited Away*.
7. Smith and Parsons, “Animating Child Activism,” 32.
8. McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki*, 185.
9. Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 204.
10. Mayumi, Solomon, and Chang, “Ecological and Consumption Themes of the Films of Hayao Miyazaki,” 2.
11. Campbell, *Primitive Mythology*, 476.

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