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Creatures in Crisis

Apocalyptic Environmental Visions in Miyazaki's
Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind and *Princess Mononoke*

GWENDOLYN MORGAN

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.

—Hayao Miyazaki, interview with *Asia Pulse*, May 16, 1997

Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki has distinguished himself from other contemporary animators with his unique style, values, and reoccurring themes of ecology, politics, flight, and Japanese culture. For Miyazaki, the preservation of Japanese cultural values is one of the main reasons why *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Princess Mononoke* have themes that focus on ecology and environment. Through symbolism, images, and story, Miyazaki integrates elements of Shinto. Followers of Shinto tenets believe that spiritual powers exist in the natural world. Miyazaki constructs a space where the complexity of relationships between humans, spirits, and nature can be explored through the art of anime. These two filmic narratives reflect simultaneously our history and our future with their environmental issues and themes. To bring a sense of heightened awareness and significance to humanity's struggle with nature, Miyazaki chose apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives. Whether set in an ancient past or a postapocalyptic future, the struggle is still the same. What is our role regarding nature: are we stewards or lords over it? Striking a balance with this relationship has always been a challenge for humanity.

In these films, Miyazaki wants viewers to confront conflicting ideas

about nature to help us understand our individual roles in transforming the earth. Miyazaki believes that in our current relationship with nature, there has been a “fragmentation of body, mind, spirit, and environment.”¹ Increasingly, the imbalance between humanity and nature has manifest itself in the forms of natural disasters, oil spills, temperature extremes, and chemicals that have found pathways into the food chain. Nature has shown a response to stress that humanity has created. Miyazaki illustrates nature’s wrath in apocalyptic and postapocalyptic settings in his films, to demonstrate how humanity can confront its unsustainable future. In this paper, I will explore how humans and animals in two of Hayao Miyazaki’s films, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Princess Mononoke*, reflect contemporary fears about environmental problems; how our perceptions may differ from reality; and how our beliefs and interpretations of reality can lead to tragic misunderstandings.

For Hayao Miyazaki, anime has become a form of expression, a mode of communicating his philosophy, and a vehicle to connect his audience with his ideas about humanity’s relationship to the natural world. Miyazaki was not always concerned about environmental issues. When Miyazaki reconnected with his cultural identity, his attitude shifted about how he perceived humanity’s role regarding nature. He acknowledges this disconnect in particular, to our relationship with forests: “I do believe of the existence of the period when the ‘power’ of the forests was much stronger than our power. There is something missing within our own attitude toward nature.”² This is visible in both *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke*. Scholars Susan Napier and Helen McCarthy both support this shift of attitude, but they approach it in different ways. Napier argues, “In Miyazaki’s view, the fourteenth century is a period of historical transition from a world that was still in close contact with both natural and supernatural forces to a world that would become increasingly oriented toward the human.”³ For Napier, the centrality of the human figure in the films signifies a focus on humanity’s dominion over nature. McCarthy supports the shift with the focus on humanity; however, she takes it a step further by arguing that it is the actions of the characters in the films that reflect our modern relationship with nature. She argues that, “despite its Medieval setting, the story speaks directly to contemporary issues, our relationship to nature in a world in which the land and oceans become increasingly polluted.”⁴

During the fourteenth century, the word “pollution” was considered a

theological term that signified moral contamination. In traditional Japanese culture, spiritual and physical pollution are closely related. Miyazaki ardently believes that when humans moved from hunting and gathering to living in an agrarian society, they became focused on manipulating their environment for their own personal desires. He stated, “It was in this period that people changed their value system from gods to money.”⁵ This shift of values indicated a change in culture concerning our relationship with nature, and Miyazaki wanted to make films about that shift. *Princess Mononoke* is set in an agrarian society that is in transition. The feudal village of Emishi is secluded from advancement and is contrasted with the progress of Iron Town. Though the agrarian society of Emishi is closer to the earth, Miyazaki is critical of both of these types of relationships with nature. His relationship with nature looks at human history with the beginning marked by farming, when we began tampering with the earth. He states that “the moment we invented farming we started to plunder nature mercilessly. Both famine and abundance are contained in the cycles of nature and that’s the way people were, before they took a bite out of the apple, so to speak. When you search for the reason why humans did a foolish thing, you arrive at farming.”⁶

The narrative of *Nausicaä* examines this disconnect. The apocalyptic environment arose from the Ceramic Wars, a thousand years earlier. The decimation the people suffered pushed them backward to an agrarian and feudal society. Once again, they are making the same choices about how to cope with the environmental problems that could lead to their annihilation. By focusing on the cycle of environmental mistakes that his characters make, he wants the audience to question our choices, bringing awareness to our relationship with nature.

Appealing to the Spiritual

Miyazaki appeals to the spiritual side of his audience by drawing on existing religious themes, like *kami* from the Shinto religion, giving reverence to nature. However, Miyazaki separates himself from organized religion in his films: “I’ve never made religion a basis for my films. My own religion, if you can call it that, has no practice, no Bible, no saints, only a desire to keep certain places and my own self as pure and holy as possible. That kind of spirituality is very important to me. Obviously, it’s an essential value that cannot help but manifest itself in my films.”⁷

If Miyazaki had embraced traditional Shinto spirituality and practices, he would not have made apocalyptic and postapocalyptic environmental films. Susan Napier states, “Traditional Japanese culture has never shared in this (apocalyptic) vision. Neither traditional Buddhism nor Shintoism, envisions anything like the final battle between the good and evil of Revelation.”⁸

The characters that Miyazaki creates in *Princess Mononoke* transform spiritual beliefs into a visual and alternative form. Kodama forest spirits are tiny, childlike, playful creatures that make clicking sounds and guide Ashitaka, the protagonist, through the forest. The Shishigami is the powerful forest spirit, the creator and destroyer of all living things. It is presented in the form of a stag with many antlers, and at night it transforms into a Diabacchi, a large ghostlike creature that walks over the land. Miyazaki’s own spirituality played a central role in the development of this character in *Princess Mononoke*: “I think the Japanese did kill the Shishigami (deer god) around the time of the Muromachi era. And then, we stopped being in awe of forests.”⁹ When humanity disconnects from nature, we witness nature’s wrath, an apocalyptic cleansing of the land and a return to purity. Purification is a tenet of Shinto, an action showing respect to the spirits. Prior to entering sacred grounds or a sacred temple, Shinto practitioners will engage in a process of purification, wiping themselves clean morally and physically. Miyazaki places Shinto tenets in his films. Shinto values become a vehicle through which Miyazaki can reach audiences by appealing to their spiritual connection with nature and bring further meaning to his stories.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind is a film about a young princess who restores harmony between humans and nature in a postapocalyptic world. In *Nausicaä*, there are elements of Christian and Catholic spirituality. *Nausicaä* is seen as a savior at the end of the film. Sacrificing herself to save a baby Ohmu, she appeals to God to protect her people from the Ohmu and achieves victory over death. *Nausicaä* is a scientist, explorer, conservationist, and martyr. This “noble-minded heroine” respects nature and, during the course of the film, learns to understand humans’ place within it.¹⁰

Contemporary Fears about Environmental Problems

For Miyazaki, apocalyptic themes are central to understanding the potential destruction and impacts we can have on the environment. These

apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives reflect contemporary fears on two levels: loss of control and living with consequences. Scholar Amy Murphy argues, “Humans must still accept that there is a tipping point, even in such a toxic condition, beyond which we have gone too far—when nature will return as an avenger.”¹¹ On both of these levels, Miyazaki presents nature as the avenger. This is demonstrated when the Ohmu, spores, and Toxic Jungle converge on the only remaining pristine place in *Nausicaä*. This tipping point is present in *Princess Mononoke* when the Shishigami is beheaded, which begins a tidal wave of toxic blackness that gulfs the entire landscape and people.

Miyazaki demonstrates the loss of control in *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke*, showing conflicts among the tribes over territory. This is similar to Japan’s past with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one race of people dominating over another. What is most disconcerting is how closely the environment in *Nausicaä* reflects the ruin of those two cities following the nuclear bomb. The encroaching Toxic Jungle is symbolic of the nuclear radiation that spread and lingered throughout Japan for years following the blast. Though a nuclear bombing is not recent, the possibility still remains in our collective environmental consciousness and in conflicts among countries throughout the world. Another instance that signifies a loss of control in *Nausicaä* occurs when the Ohmu charge in a massive group toward the humans torturing the baby Ohmu. The Tolmekians captured the baby Ohmu and began torturing it with harpoons to lure the massive group of Ohmu into the valley, with the distinct intent on killing them with an ancient God Warrior. The Ohmu charge forward with red eyes blaring, and the humans know that they could meet their fate at that moment. The actions of the characters in the films are symbolic of humanity’s poor choices over approaches to solving environmental problems.

The loss of control that is shown reflects the fears that humanity has regarding the state of the environment. In *Princess Mononoke*, it is not so much the loss of control but rather the battle for dominance in the world between humanity and nature. The fear is that humanity won’t be in control; it will be a battle they will lose. When Lady Eboshi beheads the Shishigami, the deer god, it metamorphoses into a black massive blob surrounding all life on the planet. The earth turns brown and cracks open; the forest spirits die in the blackness that surrounds them, while the immense Shishigami searches for its head.

The fear of living with consequences is present in *Nausicaä* from the very beginning. We learn that Nausicaä is living in a postapocalyptic world, unable to breathe without a respirator because of the large amount of toxic spores. Her world is portrayed as forever toxic, resulting from the God Warriors a millennium prior. Comparing her world with that of ours and the toxic chemicals that have been dumped into our atmosphere and environment, we can begin to see that there is a tipping point where we are slowly annihilating ourselves. When the Ohmu baby is kidnapped and tortured in *Nausicaä*, Nausicaä understands the significance when she sees the baby with the Tolmekians and understands how enraged the Ohmu will become. The attempt to lure the Ohmu out of the Toxic Jungle, with the baby hostage, will result in complete destruction. Nausicaä relinquishes control of her life to save the baby Ohmu, nature, and humankind. Miyazaki appeals to our fear of war and absolute destruction by showing the extremes of apocalyptic destruction. In *Nausicaä* we witness a postapocalyptic world that is the result of humanity's conflict with nature. By awakening the ancient God Warrior to wipe out the Toxic Jungle and mutant insects, we witness a history of this world repeating itself. Humanity cannot expect to rid themselves of one problem entirely without also having an effect on themselves.

In *Princess Mononoke* the message that Miyazaki conveys is that with mutual dependence there is mutual destruction. The absolute destruction we witness results from a single bullet fired by Lady Eboshi that strikes the boar god, Tatari Gami. This single bullet begins a chain of events that leads to the destruction of the Oak Forest and the planet. Miyazaki illustrates the fear of living with consequences in *Princess Mononoke*, with the killing of the forest spirit, where we break something to the point of no return. The survivors of the Shishigami's wrath emerge at the end of the film and realize the significance of the forest gods. One character at the end of the film states, "I never knew it was the Shishigami that made the flowers grow."¹²

How Our Perceptions May Differ from Reality

Just as Ashitaka was cursed by the boar god, known as Tatari Gami, we are cursed with inheriting environmental problems. Miyazaki states, "Ashitaka is not a cheerful, worry-free boy. He is a melancholy boy who has a fate. . . . Ashitaka was cursed for a very absurd reason. Sure, Ash-

itaka did something he should not have done—killing Tataru Gami. But there was enough reason to do so from the humans' viewpoint. Nevertheless, he received a deadly curse. I think that is similar to the lives of people today."¹³ We are not entirely like Ashitaka, but we aren't entirely innocent when it involves environmental challenges, especially with climate change. Whether or not we choose to "see it with eyes unclouded" depends on us.

Even supposedly good intentions, in solving environmental problems, can be a catalyst for conflict and apocalyptic destruction. Miyazaki shows that human aspirations and motives for advancement can cause havoc on the environment. Industrialization in both films surpasses natural ways of life. Scholar Amy Murphy argues that *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* "focuses on human choices when attitudes of resourcism and self-elected domination can no longer be ignored by nature."¹⁴ In *Nausicaä* we witness feudal tribes, the Torumekians and the Pejites, warring over the diminishing areas of land from the ever-growing Toxic Jungle. Not only are they fighting one another over land; they are fighting against large mutant bugs in the jungle. They insist on using warships and weapons of the ancients that previously led to the Seven Days of Fire. A woman warrior, Commander Kushana of Torumekia, leads the Torumekian crusade to awaken the ancient God Warrior, to destroy the encroaching Toxic Jungle. Scholar Inaga Shigemi argues that the "bio-monster weapon represented the ultimate realization, and excavated residual, of the lost Mega-ceramic-industrial-civilization. The fire it vomits causes a nuclear explosion, reminiscent of the catastrophe of Hiroshima/Nagasaki."¹⁵ Their world is still in a process of healing, through the removal of the poisons being absorbed by the plants and bugs of the Toxic Jungle. Their good intentions for keeping the Toxic Jungle and mutant bugs at bay are misguided because they are unaware that the Toxic Jungle is healing the land underground. The warring tribes cannot see beyond their history regarding their choices and technological developments.

In *Princess Mononoke* Lady Eboshi had good intentions for the technological advancement of Irontown. She provides employment in her factory for former prostitutes and lepers to help her mine iron ore and build weapons. The sale of weapons generates revenue for the village. Her protection for the people within the walls of Irontown creates a culture of fear of the forest and spirits that live within it. Industrialization

surpasses the natural way of life; and when humans mine for ore and cause deforestation, they essentially declared war on the forest gods. Lady Eboshi is pragmatic in her actions, and she rejects the spiritual aspect of nature and seeks security for her people. Even though her intentions are good, her disconnect from nature and her misunderstanding of the role of the spirits in the forest lead Lady Eboshi to pick up a gun and shoot the boar god. Once the boar god is shot, it becomes a monstrous spirit that attacks the peaceful village of Emishi. The interruption of the continuity of nature occurs when the characters turn inward and begin thinking of the forest or jungle as the other. The characters fail to see that they are a part of nature. The old monk Jigo, who works as an agent for the emperor, is led by greed to kill the forest god Shishigami by cutting off its head and presenting it to the emperor for money. Rather than kill the forest god himself, he persuades Lady Eboshi to behead the Shishigami, which begins the course for environmental apocalyptic destruction. The Shishigami's wrath is felt as blackness surrounds all life killing the forest and spirits within it. This occurs as a result of Jigo's desire for money and Eboshi's desire for security. This illustrates how closely linked humans are to nature and how one action will create reactions that carry down the environmental chain.

By evaluating the supposedly good intentions of the characters in *Nausicaä* and in *Princess Mononoke*, we can begin to see our failings and fears in how we approach environmental problems. Just as Miyazaki shows the characters' misunderstanding of the complete cycle of nature, we can begin to see our incomplete picture regarding climate change. Just as warring tribes in *Nausicaä* tackle the encroaching Toxic Jungle by different means, we can compare that with politicians and scientists squabbling over data findings about the existence of climate change and how we should take action to combat it.

How Our Beliefs and Interpretations of Reality Can Lead to Tragic Misunderstandings

These two levels of fear ultimately serve to lead us to the question, What is our role with nature? Are we stewards or lords? In *Nausicaä* and in *Princess Mononoke*, the message that Miyazaki provides is that with mutual dependence comes mutual destruction. We are connected to nature, and what we do affects everything down the environ-

mental chain. Nausicaä's grandmother says, "The anger of the Ohmu is the anger of the earth. Of what use is surviving, relying on a thing like that?"¹⁶ What Nausicaä's grandmother is describing is the ancient God Warrior. Fear of the Ohmu and misunderstanding the Toxic Forest and the renewal that was occurring underneath were the driving factors in awakening this apocalyptic force. The people's dependence on the ancient God Warrior signified a return to a life that previously ended in destruction. The ancient God Warrior is symbolic of an atomic bomb and power over nature. Napier argues, "It is a wake-up call to human beings in a time of environmental and spiritual crisis that attempts to provoke the audience into realizing how much they've already lost and how much they stand to lose."¹⁷ Systematic structures broke down when the ancient God Warrior was awakened. In this postapocalyptic landscape, we see humans, especially the warring tribes, taking the role of lords over nature. In *Princess Mononoke* most characters, except for San, try to dominate nature. They are controlling it through farming, mining, deforestation, and killing of the forest gods. Similar to the ancient God Warrior in size, the Shishigami is a natural apocalyptic force. It is through the human characters' mistakes that Miyazaki is calling into question our relationship with nature; separation and being at war with nature ends in disaster in both films.

Even with apocalyptic and postapocalyptic themes throughout *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke*, there is a collective vision of hope and renewal. For Miyazaki, apocalyptic themes are central to understanding the potential destruction we can have on the environment. Some scholars see these depictions as a warning that our current lifestyles and values do not align with nature. Cavallaro argues that "Miyazaki's movies emphasize not only the enlightening potential of the confrontation with disintegrating structures but also the iconic value of ruins as reminder of the human penchant for destructiveness, be it entirely mindless and ideologically motivated."¹⁹ This destructiveness is visibly represented in *Nausicaä* by a disintegrating social structure with the tribes warring between one another. The valley, though pristine at the beginning of the film, is destroyed when Commander Kushana invades, bringing with her the ancient God Warrior. In *Princess Mononoke*, destruction is present from the very beginning, starting with the bullet that rips through the boar god, changing him into a beast intent on destroying mankind. With deforestation and the land being depleted of iron ore for Irontown

weapons both actions convey ecological ruin. When the Shishigami is killed, his wrath pours over the land in a massive black glob destroying and purging everything in its path, leaving the past in ruins. Not only does Miyazaki artfully demonstrate that some of these ruins are reminders of our capacity for violent apocalyptic destruction, but our culture and principles can contribute to our ruin. Miyazaki is calling for a new culture and relationship with the natural world, where humans live in harmony with nature.

Conclusion

It is important to note that none of these societies presented in *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke* are necessarily good or evil; rather they are made up of complex characters attempting to solve problems despite their limited worldview and understanding. The question that arises from these films is, What is our role with nature? Are we stewards or lords over it? In *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke*, the constant message is that with mutual dependence follows mutual destruction. We are connected to nature, and what we do disrupts everything down the environmental chain. In this postapocalyptic landscape, we see humans, especially warring tribes, taking the role of lords over nature. In *Princess Mononoke* most characters, with the exception of San, have taken the role of lords over nature. They are controlling the landscape through farming, mining, and deforestation. It is through the human characters' mistakes that Miyazaki is calling into question our relationship with nature. Acting as lords over nature fails in both films. Miyazaki shows how differences in beliefs and misinterpretations of situations can lead to tragic misunderstandings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gwendolyn Morgan is a wildlife filmmaker and adjunct professor who earned her BA from Le Moyne College and her MFA from American University. Her field experience includes rappelling into caves to shoot footage of bats and traveling by airboat to shoot footage in the Everglades. Her professional work experience also includes film production, video, broadcast television news, journalism, graphic design, research, writing, web design, and multimedia. Her thesis film, *Spinning toward Green* (2008), was nominated for the Vasek Award in the 2010 International VAASA Wildlife Film Festival in Finland and received an honorable mention

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NOTES

1. Wright, "Forest Spirits, Giant Insects and World Trees," 85.
2. Miyazaki, *Starting Point 1979–1996*.
3. Napier, *Anime*, 108.
4. McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki*, 234.
5. Napier, *Anime*, 194.
6. Miyazaki, "I Understand NAUSICAA a Bit More."
7. Miyazaki, *Starting Point 1979–1996*.
8. Napier, *Anime*, 194.
9. Miyazaki, "Interview."
10. Loy and Goodhew, "Dharma of Miyazaki Hayao," 69.
11. Murphy, "Future Traditions of Nature," 12.
12. Quotes from the dialogue are taken from the English subtitles of the US release.
13. Miyazaki, "Interview."
14. Murphy, "Future Traditions of Nature," 11.
15. Inaga, "Miyazaki Hayao's Epic Comic Series," 118.
16. Quotes from the dialogue are taken from the English subtitles of the US release.
17. Napier, *Anime*, 108.
18. Cavallaro, *Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, 38.

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