

From Robot Pastoral to Theme Park Idyll:

Environmentalism, Modernization and Postmodernization in the Films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata

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To anyone acquainted with recent developments in science fiction, comic strips, graphic novels and animated film, it will come as no surprise that these genres, which were for a long time considered marginal to the mainstream literary canon and mostly aimed at younger readers and viewers, have now become important vehicles for environmentalist thought and art. For writers of science fiction, it has become extremely difficult to develop any plausible vision of the world fifty, one hundred or a thousand years into the future without giving some account of the state of the natural environment. In graphic novels and animated film, the long tradition of the speaking and thinking animal is being rethought in view of recent biotechnologies, cognitive science, and pervasive threats to biodiversity around the globe. In addition, changes in the techniques of print and animation enabled by rapidly advancing digital technologies have opened up new realms of visual possibility. This combination of factors is increasingly turning graphic novels and animated films into media of serious reflection and complex aesthetic expression, including sustained consideration of humans' relationship to the natural environment.

In this presentation, I will focus on the medium of animated film, and specifically on the works of two directors who have shaped the by now globally acclaimed Studio Ghibli for almost 25 years: Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao. Both directors have earned a reputation for extraordinary visual inventiveness and technical virtuosity, complex characters and elaborate plots. My particular concern is with those of their films that explicitly address environmentalist issues, especially Takahata's *Pom Poko* (1994) and Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Of course, in a short presentation such as this one, it would be impossible to explore all the facets of the environmental thought manifest in those works. I would like to explore briefly how Miyazaki and Takahata position their environmentalist reflections differently in the context of modernization and postmodernization, and what the implications of these different approaches might be from an ecocritical perspective. In brief, I will argue that Takahata portrays environmentalist struggle in the midst of an aggressively postmodern context of urban development, television and theme park culture whose emphasis on spectacle and simulation highlights the ambiguities of any attempt to imagine a return to authentic nature. Miyazaki studiously avoids precisely this contemporary world, situating his plots instead in an earlier phase of modernity dominated by such technologies as mines, foundries, railways and airplanes rather than more postmodern ones of communication and information. Neither director envisions any genuine reconciliation between the natural environment and modern or postmodern human societies. But Miyazaki's imagination of an earlier type of modernity leaves open a space for a natural world to which ordinary humans have no access, while Takahata's focus on the postmodern relentlessly assimilates and integrates everything natural into the framework of human culture.

Let me begin with Takahata's *Pom Poko*, titled more precisely in the original *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Ponpoko* [平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ], The Pom Poko War of the Raccoons in the Heisei Era. The film revolves

around the struggle of a tribe of raccoon-like animals particular to East Asia, the tanuki, against an urban development in the Tama Hills outside of Tokyo. Setting up a discarded TV set as their central source of information about human behavior, the tanuki monitor the development plans. Using their legendary shape-shifting abilities, they then engage in classical environmentalist ecotage by causing accidents, sabotaging construction equipment and scaring construction crews and prospective residents. When these tactics prove unsuccessful, they send for powerful shape-shifting masters from other islands and stage a spectacular parade in the urban streets that includes figures and images from Japanese folklore, Buddhist symbolism as well as modern culture, on the assumption that this display will inspire reverence for the power of the tanuki in urban residents and lead them to rescind their plans of destroying the tanukis' habitat in Tama Hills.

[Short film clip 1 from *Pom Poko*]

In various ways, this scene juxtaposes the imagery of traditional Japanese culture and religion with modern media entertainment; perhaps most obviously, two of the simulated figures appear to be crashing through the gigantic screen of a drive-in movie theater, demonstrating the power of the traditional over the postmodernist imagination. Tapes that run during the display turn out to record nothing, in another hint that this older imaging power exceeds the grip of postmodernist recording technologies. But significantly, it is also through a quintessentially postmodern medium that the tanuki learn of the defeat of their climactic spectacle: when they return to their headquarters and eagerly turn on the TV to see the reaction to their campaign, it turns out that so far from affirming the power of nature, the spectacle is instead being claimed as an advertising stunt by the local theme park. Indeed, so impressed is the director of the theme park with the quality of the display that he knows was not created by his institution that he desperately seeks to recruit the services of the professionals that in fact produced it. A fox with human appearance – foxes are another species with shape-shifting abilities in Japanese folklore – offers his services as an intermediary and contacts the tanuki. Like the foxes, he suggests, the tanuki should give up their foolish dream of maintaining a natural habitat outside human society; instead, those capable of shape-shifting into humans on a more or less permanent basis should integrate themselves into urban culture and de facto become simulated humans.

Such an assimilation indeed takes place by the end of the film, with some tanuki assuming human identities and jobs, and those incapable of shape-shifting eking out a living on the edges of urban culture. But before surrendering to human culture, the tanuki undertake a last massive effort at simulation and recreate the original rural landscape of Tama Hills as it existed before the development project started. It is only at this moment, in the collectively created simulation, that the film viewer gets to see this originary landscape – at any rate, by no means a pristine wilderness, but a pastoral panorama of woods, rice fields and traditional farm houses. If Takahata here seems to affirm that nature in its original state is only accessible to us through simulations – whether it be tanuki shape-shifting or contemporary anime – this suggestion is reinforced by the animation technique of the film itself. Apart from the moments when they actually metamorphose into another being or object, the tanuki are also represented in very different forms when they are just being themselves. In one type of drawing, they appear as simplified, more or less realistic canine animals walking on all fours; they assume this shape in the film typically when they are seen by humans or at the moment of death. During much of their life in the woods, by contrast, they are portrayed as bear-like, more "cuddly"-looking creatures walking on two legs

with distinctive individual markers. At times, they morph into a third, far more abstract form of representation in which they assume the simple lines and well-rounded cuteness of many Walt Disney animated creatures, with few distinguishing marks to differentiate the protagonists.

[Short film clip 2 from *Pom Poko*]

In a highly self-referential manner, Takahata's technique constantly reminds spectators that they are in fact viewing highly stylized representations of nature even and especially when we are made to see the world through animals' eyes. In terms of its narrative plot as well as its visual technique, therefore, Takahata presents nature as always ineluctably a product of human culture, and in this case in particular the product of a postmodernist, highly mediated and urban culture.

Even though Takahata and Miyazaki have collaborated on numerous projects at Studio Ghibli, Miyazaki's vision of nature in the end differs appreciably from Takahata's in most of his major films. Miyazaki, too, focuses on the ways in which the human presence endangers and sometimes destroys natural ecosystems. Yet he places this encounter at an earlier, typically European-tinted stage of modernity from which technologies and institutions such as television, photography, computers, contemporary automobiles, mass tourism, convenience stores or theme parks are almost completely absent. Instead, Miyazaki aggressively foregrounds the central technologies of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity – airplanes of various sorts abound, as do railroads, tanks, mines and foundries – in conjunction with distinctly premodern social features and technologies such as aristocratic governing elites, windmills, horse-back riding, and so on. Moreover, while humans in films such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* [風の谷のナウシカ; 1984] and *Princess Mononoke* [もののけ姫; 1997] exploit and destroy nature – or have done so in the past – nature also existentially threatens them in turn. In *Nausicaä*, set one thousand years into the future after a devastating nuclear war, humans are reduced to small communities that struggle for survival against the gradual spread of the so-called "Sea of Decay" [腐海 (ふかい)], really a poisonous jungle guarded by massive and extremely aggressive insects. In *Princess Mononoke*, the forest strikes back against humans' encroachments by means of enraged herds of boars and powerful spiritual forces that prove capable of destroying human settlements. Humans' pervasive destructive impact – signalled here as in many other Miyazaki films through the prominence of military technologies and conflicts – in other words, is counterbalanced by a natural world that at times makes human survival seem precarious.

This does not imply that Miyazaki portrays the natural realm as set radically apart from modern human culture in any absolute sense. The female protagonists of *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke* are both linked to the life of the hostile forest in a way that is inaccessible to other humans; and while *Mononoke* remains implacably opposed to modern human civilization, there is some hope toward the end of *Nausicaä* that the princess of the Valley of the Wind will be able to make others see what she has come to discover about the true ecological function of the toxic jungle. Even more strikingly, in *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* [天空の城ラピュタ; 1986], the airborne civilization of Laputa is declared to have become non-viable by the heroine because it detached itself from the Earth. But in the ruined gardens of the floating city, a thriving and idyllic natural life has sprung up, with merrily chirping birds and scurrying squirrels. Not so much wild nature as an idealized garden landscape, this idyll, after the departure of the heroes and the destruction of the greater part of the city, remains

under the care of a gigantic Laputan robot whose close relationship to plants and animals in every way resembles that of Nausicaä in Miyazaki's earlier film. Since the face of this robot is obviously modeled on the cubist portraiture of Pablo Picasso, resembling a human face shown both frontally and in profile, one might be tempted to conclude that Miyazaki here establishes a connection to nature by means of art in much the way Takahata does through the shifting representations of the tanuki. Yet humans are explicitly excluded from this techno-pastoral at the end of the film, leaving the robot to take care of the gardens in a floating part-natural, part-technological city henceforth unvisited by earthlings. Far from any assimilation of nature into modern civilization via technology, this ending seals off a certain kind of natural realm from human intrusion even more definitively than humans are barred from the forests of *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke*.

[Show brief film clip of *Laputa*]

There is, then, I'd argue, a certain degree of eco-nostalgia that informs Miyazaki's portrayal of environmental crisis. But this nostalgia does not really manifest itself in any imagination of natural landscapes untouched by humans, nor even in the wishful fantasy that nature will be powerful enough to strike back if humans abuse it excessively (though Miyazaki's films sometimes contain an element of such fantasy). Rather, Miyazaki's nostalgia lies in the insistence that there are parts of nature, however modified by humans, that will never be completely assimilated into modern urban civilization, but will continue to lead a life apart. Since Miyazaki imagines humans' intrusion into nature mostly in terms of physical, mechanical alteration, this vision is easier to uphold in his fictional universe than in Takahata's, where nature is also being physically modified through urban development, but where its crucial appropriation takes place through the virtual realm of postmodern media technologies. Indeed, one of Miyazaki's reasons for not staging the encounter between nature and modern society in the contemporary world, but rather in an earlier version of modernity, may well be that the ubiquity of postmodern media makes it harder to envision the persistence of any natural realm not appropriated at least by camera lenses and television coverage, if not by actual tourism and development. By eschewing a portrayal of this kind of appropriation, Miyazaki also, far more than Takahata, evades the question of what role animated film has played and will play in the human reconfigurations of nature. Miyazaki ultimately seems to want to exempt his own medium from any complicity in this appropriation of the natural, whereas Takahata candidly, and not without a great deal of humor and self-irony, admits his own entanglement in postmodern media arts and their reconfiguration and commodification of nature. Through their quite different portrayals of the encounter between nature and modernizing human culture, therefore, Takahata and Miyazaki ultimately attribute quite different functions to their own medium, animated film, in the development of environmentalist thought.