The aesthetics and ethics of Hayao Miyazaki’s enchanted forests

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Introduction
Long dismissed as trifling entertainment, animated film as a form of public pedagogy has become a subject of serious study in popular and scholarly discourse over the past two and a half decades. Animation today is understood as a diverse and mature visual genre that encompasses a breadth of styles and demonstrates increasing dexterity in exploring complex issues. Especially persuasive in educating and acculturating children, animation has inspired much discussion over the lessons popular films impart.¹ English scholar Ursula K. Heise posits that animation shares a particularly close affinity with environmentalism, since it attributes value, sentience, and liveliness to the natural world, specifically to non-humans and non-living objects. Its techniques set animals, plants, and even features of the landscape in motion and endow them with agency. Animation should therefore “be understood as the principal aesthetic genre that engages with the reification of nature and its possible alternatives in modern society”.² Within the genre, perhaps no other accomplishes this as successfully as Japanese auteur Hayao Miyazaki, co-founder of Studio Ghibli and widely regarded as one of cinema’s greats.

To reify nature is to treat its “complex dynamics and histories as mere things”.³ A consistent concern in Miyazaki’s films, he believes this to be a result of modern technology and industrialisation, which have estranged humans from the natural world and emboldened them to exploit it, though much to their own peril. Miyazaki’s films thus often depict natural environments undisturbed by humans. One recurring setting and motif he uses is the enchanted forest, which features most prominently in the films My Neighbour Totoro (となりのトトロ, Tonari no Totoro, 1988) and Princess Mononoke (もののけ姫, Mononoke-hime, 1997).⁴ Enchanted forests are familiar in storytelling for children, particularly in fantasy, folklore, and fairy tales. They come alive and become enchanted through fantastical entities that demonstrate agency, but are indivisible from their environments.⁵ Miyazaki’s rendition sets itself apart by relying on the aesthetics of the wilderness and spirituality, which are informed by his beliefs in environmental stewardship and Japanese animism respectively. His artistic choices therefore intertwine

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² Ursula K. Heise, Public Culture, 303.
³ Harriet Johnson, Constellations, 318.
⁴ The enchanted forest also features in Kiki’s Delivery Service (魔女の宅急便, Majo no Takkyūbin, 1989) and Spirited Away (千と千尋の神隠, Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi, 2001).
⁵ Patsy Maritz, Alternation, 138.
with his eco-philosophy to depict enchanted forests as alive and animated, confronting and co-existing with human characters.

**Environmental pedagogy, the Miyazaki way**

As global environmental degradation looms threateningly over human civilisation, many turn to inculcating activism in children with the hopes that they can change the future. From *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) to *WALL-E* (2008) to *The Lorax* (2012), environmentalism increasingly enters popular children’s films as a form of public pedagogy. While Miyazaki too makes films with children in mind—“They are my way of blessing the child”⁶—he firmly rejects any overt or obvious messaging in his films. To do so would be “like a big fat dried-up log, propped upright”.⁷ Instead, he devotes careful attention to creating visual exercises that retrain the eye to observe and appreciate the inherent value and beauty of small, often overlooked, everyday natural phenomena, such as the movement of water or flowers bending in the wind. Animation as a medium allows Miyazaki to explore real world issues in pleasurable and playful ways via imaginative world-building, but he never advises or deliberately promotes ’right’ versus ’wrong’ choices, the way most mainstream or Hollywood-produced animated films tend to do.⁸

The animation genre is dominated Walt Disney Animation Studios, the environmental pedagogy of which is often sentimental, sanitised, and anthropomorphic. Miyazaki represents the inverse. He is adamant about not simplifying the world’s problems for children and portraying nature as unquestioningly benevolent towards humans.⁹ Instead, he stresses humility. Opposing human-centric ethics, Miyazaki reminds children that they are but a small part of a larger ecosystem through his films’ natural landscapes, which often dwarf human characters with their epic vastness and depth. In other words, Miyazaki’s eco-philosophy is his belief that humans are of nature and not external to it, challenging post-industrial dualistic thinking that separates nature from culture, which justifies the latter’s exploitation of the former as expendable materials. This belief guides his artistic choices, and as such, Miyazaki’s stories nearly always take place in an imagined past imbued with fantastical elements, where humans can interact with non-humans and their environments under equal, if not inverted, relations of power.

**Enchanted forests as wilderness landscapes**

The untameable mass of thick foliage that towers over humans in enchanted forests is a manifestation of Miyazaki’s nostalgia for wilderness landscapes, which refers to ecosystems untouched by and possibly hostile towards humans.¹⁰ Miyazaki believes that both adults and children can experience nostalgia for the wilderness because humans are spiritual descendants of forests.¹¹ Japanese studies scholar Alistair Swale therefore

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¹¹ Ibid.
notes that nostalgia here is not tied to memory, but can best be understood as an innate yearting to return to humanity's 'roots'. In My Neighbour Totoro, Miyazaki wields such powerful feelings of yearting to convey deference to the history and magnificence of trees, thereby restoring power to the forest. The film follows two sisters, Mei and Satsuki, who move into an old house in late 1950s rural Japan with their father Tatsuo, a university professor. The purpose of the move is to live closer to their mother as she stays in a nearby hospital while recuperating from a long-term illness. When Mei ventures into an enchanted forest near their house, she falls down a hole in an enormous and ancient camphor tree à la Alice in Wonderland, only to discover a strange, gentle, and giant creature she names Totoro. Host to colourful butterflies, lush greenery, and the forest spirits, the prospering camphor tree brims with life, and at times seems to contain a life force within itself, its imposing presence quietly watching over the family home. Not only does the tree distract the two sisters from their anxieties about their mother's condition with endless play, but its vastness also lends a sense of reliability and protection, almost like a parent or neighbour. Close-up tracking shots of the bark emphasise the tree's size, indicating that it takes up a great deal of space. Almost as if appraising the tree, this is followed by languid, extreme low-angle shots of the dense foliage, mimicking the subject's eye from the ground. Tatsuo exhales after a moment of reflection: "What a beautiful tree. This tree must have stood here for years and years. Trees and people used to be good friends." He and the girls then pay their respects to the camphor tree, thanking it for "looking after Mei". The juxtaposition between the tall, looming camphor tree and the three small figures bowing at its base underscores humility in human-nature relations. Miyazaki also calls attention to the longevity and irreplaceable heritage value of trees that span numerous generations. He teaches audiences to appreciate trees' life-giving properties without striving to dominate them. In fact, he suggests that such mastery over the wilderness is impossible; throughout the film, Mei and Satsuki cannot always find or access the enchanted forest and its mythical creatures. The power of Miyazaki's enchanted forest therefore lies in its unpredictable messiness and omniscient control. It is an active participant in his stories, rather than an inert landscape for audiences to simply vicariously consume as a visual spectacle. Tatsuo and the girls' humble and respectful treatment of the enchanted forest, and their gratitude towards it, is also presented as an ideal example of the inverted human-nature relations Miyazaki imagines to have existed in the past. Through the eyes of innocent children that can see magic in forests untouched by humans, Miyazaki shows that they too can recognise the possibility of cultivating an intimate, transcendental connection to nature, through which he mirrors his yearning for them.

Environmentalist Gary Snyder interprets the wilderness as “a place where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and non-living beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order.” While the mysterious forces of the wilderness are a source of energy and strength in the carefree childhood adventures of My Neighbour Totoro, they can also be disconcerting in the more politically charged and

13 Gary Snyder, The practice of the wild, 12.
violent *Princess Mononoke*. If the former relies on a ‘cute’ and more heart-warming aesthetic to encourage imagination and an appreciation of nature’s beauty, in the latter, nature is a thing of terror and majesty, demanding respect and reverence through the sublime.\(^{14}\) *Princess Mononoke* is set during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), which saw Japan’s first attempt at establishing modern transportation and communication networks. A cursed prince Ashitaka finds himself caught in a war between Irontown, led by Lady Eboshi, and the animal gods of a sacred forest. Irontown is built on cutting down trees and mining the earth for iron, thus threatening the lives and habitats of those living in the forest. Together with San, a human girl raised by wolves, Ashitaka must reconcile the conflict to lift his curse.

Most striking in the film is the suspension of sound, especially during scenes set in the most secluded parts of the forest. In a hallucinatory sequence where a wounded Ashitaka is healed by the Great Forest Spirit, “a deer-like creature with a face that is reminiscent both of a beast and a human being”, religious studies scholar Christine Hoff Kraemer argues that the near-silence invokes “the aura of the uncanny and the sacred”.\(^{15}\) Somehow simultaneously peaceful yet startling, such moments of diegetic silence grant audiences brief respite from what has been a loud and chaotic film, but the sharp contrast also encourages overwhelming feelings of awe towards nature. The sudden absence of sound signals the transition from reality to a surrealist dreamscape and the divine presence of the Forest Spirit intensifies in the next zoom-in shot, where its brightly backlit silhouette creates a glowing or halo effect around its edges. As explained by statesman Edmund Burke in his book *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, connecting nature and the sublime is to incorporate the essence of *astonishment*: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature [...] is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror”.\(^{16}\) The epic wilderness of the enchanted forest and Miyazaki’s firm assertion of the futility to control or tame its unruly forces therefore comprise his expression of the sublime in these films.

**Enchanted forests as spiritual sites**

As a liminal space between reality and the supernatural, enchanted forests in storytelling often act as spiritual trials for human characters since they spawn mystery, danger, and adventure for those who venture into it. Through Miyazaki’s obsessive attention to small, seemingly insignificant details and nature personified as gods, spirits, and deities, his protagonists learn in the enchanted forest to see humans not as exceptional beings but as simply one of many manifestations of sentience, and they emerge from the narrative charged with the duties of environmental stewardship. The first night Tatsuo and the girls move into their new house in *My Neighbour Totoro*, strong winds from the forest blow ominously, stealing firewood out of Satsuki’s hands in the dark and lifting them sky

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\(^{14}\) Michelle J. Smith, and Elizabeth Parsons, *Continuum*, 25.

\(^{15}\) Christine Hoff Kraemer, *Journal of Religion & Film*, 8.

\(^{16}\) Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful: with an introductory discourse concerning taste*, 72.
The aesthetics and ethics of Hayao Miyazaki's enchanted forests

high. The unnatural, swirling wind paths suggest consciousness and an unexplained higher power even in non-living entities like the wind. These scenes in which characters interact with nature, accompanied only by diegetic sound or minimal scoring, are a Miyazaki stylistic signature uncommon in mainstream Japanese and Western animation. They do not advance the plot, but force audiences to appreciate the fleeting and subliminal moments in nature.\(^{17}\) Informed by Japanese animism, the belief that all creatures, objects, and even places can be ascribed a distinct 'life force', Miyazaki’s preoccupation with carefully capturing every detail in his landscapes also adds dimension and realism to his built worlds. He suggests that such magical encounters in the enchanted forest can only be accessed by children like Mei and Satsuki, Ashitaka and San, who are pure of heart and therefore capable of forming an intimate and transcendental connection with nature. Totoro, for instance, only reveals itself to Satsuki when the girls are waiting for him at a bus stop one rainy night. By sharing a second umbrella with Totoro, Satsuki demonstrates kindness and care towards other creatures. And in return, Totoro amuses the weary sisters and halts the rain. Historian Brendan C. Walsh credits Satsuki’s intuitive engagement with the natural world to the innately “creative spirit of childhood”.\(^{18}\) Without suspicion, greed, or fear, children like Mei and Satsuki are easily able to escape into the enchanted forest to seek solace from the realities of their situation. Miyazaki therefore seems to be encouraging environmental stewardship in children by arguing that they are uniquely in tune with nature.

Although he aligns with animistic beliefs, it should be noted that Miyazaki eschews any religious dogma or institution, including Shintoism. Rather, he treats animism as a mentality that decentres humans in human-nature relations, allowing for a critique of modernity’s myth of progress. This is most apparent through the personification of nature in Miyazaki’s enchanted forests, who speak and act for themselves. Both *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke* feature a number of forest guardians who guide, heal, threaten, and attack humans. *Princess Mononoke*, in particular, revels in nature’s capacity for malevolence. The wolf goddess Moro tells Ashitaka, “I was hoping you’d cry out in your sleep. Then I would have bitten your head off to silence you.” She also speaks on behalf of the enchanted forest, “The trees cry out as they die. But you cannot hear them.” Here, nature is resentful, bitter, and unforgiving towards the abuse and exploitation of humans. In stark contrast to Hollywood/mainstream animation, where animals are typically ‘sidekicks’ to human characters and subject to human will, Miyazaki portrays Moro as a snarling and menacing beast, baring teeth and claws. The atmosphere of danger is also palpable as Moro, positioned on a high rock facing Ashitaka’s back, seemed poised to attack at any moment, almost a metaphor for how humans continue to be at the mercy of nature. It is interesting that Miyazaki chooses to encourage ambivalent feelings towards Moro, her independence, and raw anger, rather than eliciting sympathy from audiences.\(^{19}\) The duality of the enchanted forest’s ability to calm and heal, as well as to astonish and intimidate, can be understood as a dramatic representation of the dilemma between conservation and development within environmentalism. On one hand,

\(^{17}\) Brendan C. Walsh, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 186.
\(^{18}\) Ibid, 183.
\(^{19}\) Michelle J. Smith, and Elizabeth Parsons. *Continuum*, 33.
modern humanity increasingly views natural environments as precious, sacred, and tied to their wellbeing, yet on the other there is also the impulse to dominate and master mercurial forces unknown to them. Similarly, the main ‘villain’ of the film, Lady Eboshi, represents modern humanity’s materialistic and shallow view of nature as expendable resources, yet her actions have also provided marginalised prostitutes and lepers work, home, and a community. Miyazaki therefore offers nuance and complexity by avoiding a simplified narrative of ‘good versus evil’, but he also warns against the futility of short-term material benefits in exchange for long-term spiritual losses. As the film’s plot arrives at its zenith, the Great Forest Spirit sacrifices itself and dies, the sun rising as its form spreads over the war-torn land and heals it in a symbol of rebirth. Grass, trees, and flowers grow over the destruction to reclaim it, alluding to nature’s function as the arbiter of life and death. This moment of transformation is treated with an epic sense of gravitas, as light and colour slowly re-enter the frame, indicating the characters meditating on their journey or arriving at epiphany. By restoring the enchanted forest to a time before human intervention, Miyazaki ultimately demythologises the myth of progress. Human effort to master the natural world, as shown in *Princess Mononoke*, is no match for its resilience and only causes mutually assured destruction, since humans are part of nature, rather than existing outside of it. Miyazaki hence inspires feelings of veneration in audiences to encourage admiration of nature’s beauty and strength, humility in modern humanity’s shortcomings, and submission to the natural order. Only then, he implies, can peace prevail.

**Conclusion**

Miyazaki is known for the creative and philosophical processes that guide his work, where he revels in the organic messiness and creativity of his unconscious mind. Instead of adhering to a prescribed or predictable storyline, he starts with visualising images and allows the story to take him where it wants to go without a specific ending in mind—“It’s not me who makes the film. The film makes itself and I have no choice but to follow.” As art is allowed to imitate life, nature in Miyazaki’s films is likewise allowed to be complex and organic. Though the enchanted forests in *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke* have very different aesthetics, the former being nostalgia for a more harmonious co-existence with nature in an imagined past, and the latter being a forceful warning against humanity’s retreat from its naturalised and spiritual origins, they stem from the same ethics of humility, respect, and rejection of speciesism that illuminate the past while providing hope for the future. In doing so, his enchanted forests come alive as active participants in his stories, instead of being relegated to the background. There is no doubt that Miyazaki’s ideas about nature are romantic, even grandiose, but it is precisely his ability to find magic in what we take for granted every day that makes his art truly compelling.

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Bibliography


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