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Forest Spirits, Giant Insects and World Trees: The Nature Vision of Hayao Miyazaki

This article is an exploration of the themes and symbols of Shinto mythology and spiritualism in the early animated feature films of Hayao Miyazaki. In his use of resonant moments of communion with nature, I argue that Miyazaki is cinematically practicing the ancient form of Shinto, which emphasised an intuitive continuity with the natural world. At the same time he is subverting Japan's cultural myths, such as the myth of an idealised ancient Japan living in harmony with nature, as articulated by kokugaku (National Studies) scholar Moto-ori Norinaga. Miyazaki is a tremendously popular anime director in Japan and his recent film, *Spirited Away* (2001), won an Academy Award, illustrating his global appeal. His work transforms and reinvigorates the tenets of Shinto, and these are juxtaposed with global culture-inspiration is taken from American science fiction, Greek myths and British children's literature-to create a hybrid "modern myth" that is accessible (in different ways) to post-industrialised audiences all over the world.

Introduction

The place where pure water is running in the depths of the forest in the deep mountains, where no human has ever set foot-the Japanese have long held such a place in their heart.

Hayao Miyazaki, 1997(n1)

I'm hoping I'll live another 30 years. I want to see the sea rise over Tokyo and the NTV tower become an island... Money and desire - all that is going to collapse, and wild green grasses are going to take over.

Hayao Miyazaki, 2005(n2)

[1] When watching the fantastic anime (animation) of Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki, it soon becomes apparent that he has infused his richly detailed worlds with an animistic ontology that references ancient Japanese beliefs, practices and myths. His films describe an intriguing mixture of earthy spirituality particularly drawn from the Shinto tradition. While spiritual themes are present in all of his films to some extent, including the Academy Award winning *Spirited Away* (2001) and recently released *Howl's Moving Castle* (2005), his earlier works are more concerned with articulating the possibility of a mystical connection between humans and the natural world. His work displays a sense of nostalgia for a time when humans lived more in harmony with nature, but at the same time he refuses to deny the current reality of modernity and industrialisation. His films problematise Japan's oft-touted love of nature (the conflict is depicted as outright war between the Gods of the Forest and the industrial humans in *Princess Mononoke*

[1997]). He also works to subvert other aspects of Japanese cultural history, particularly the collective nostalgia for an idealised 'pure heart' (magokoro) Japan. He does this by encouraging the assimilation and appreciation of foreign cultural elements (as can be seen in Nausicaa's [1984] many global narrative influences).

[2] Miyazaki has said that he only makes films for a Japanese market.(n3) With this audience in mind, Miyazaki is actively participating in Nihonjinron (a theoretical discourse of "Japaneseness," or of Japanese uniqueness), in that he is reshaping what it means to be Japanese. At the same time his films have become globally successful. While not a household name in many other countries (yet), Miyazaki's films consistently draw mass audiences and outperform American imports in Japan. Princess Mononoke was seen by 12 million people (or one tenth of the population of Japan) in just five months when it was competing with the Hollywood blockbuster Jurassic Park. Mononoke held the title of highest grossing "homemade" film for four years until Miyazaki's next work, Spirited Away, stole the title and also became the highest grossing film of all time in Japan.(n4) After making Nausicaa in 1984, adapted from his long-running serialised manga (comic) of the same name, he established his own production company, Studio Ghibli, and his subsequent films have all been made by this staunchly non-computerised anime house.

[3] Focusing on a selection of Miyazaki's earlier works: Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind, Laputa: Castle in the Sky (1986), My Neighbor Totoro (1988) and Princess Mononoke, this article will describe certain aspects of Japanese culture and society, highlighting the historical sources that describe the origins of these and Shinto beliefs. The framework of "the Ancient Way," as developed by eighteenth century Kojiki scholar Moto-ori Norinaga (1730-1801), will be used as it has been the most influential and detailed codification of the early form of natural Shinto. Norinaga and, I will argue, Miyazaki are both nostalgically seeking contact with the "pure" mystical core of this belief system, but with very different outcomes. Norinaga's ideas informed the kokugaku (National Studies) movement, which eventually led to the ideology of Tennoism and to Japan's imperialist expansion program in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Miyazaki attempts to distance himself from the significant political and nationalistic implications inherent in any discussion of Shinto, and yet is still drawing on the cultural myth of an idealised, paradisaical existence in ancient Japan. But where Norinaga and others of the Nativist school considered the magokoro of ancient times to be a Japanese birthright, Miyazaki's vision is more expansive and global. His characters can be described as both "performing Japaneseness" but also exemplifying foreign cultural traits(n5) that coalesce into coherent and transnational human traits. Essentially, his films attempt to re-enchanted his audiences with a sense of spirituality that eschews the dogmas and orthodoxies of organised religions and politics, instead reaching for the original, primal state of spiritualism in human history and how it can be lived today.

Shinto: The Way of the Kami

[4] Historically, the Japanese have been comfortable with holding a multiplicity of spiritual beliefs. Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity were all introduced and have taken root successfully (to varying degrees). A survey of religion in Japan undertaken by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in the 1970s concluded that Shinto provides "a cultural matrix ... for the acceptance and assimilation of foreign elements,"(n6) and found that far from displacing indigenous traditions, introduced religions are assimilated into the Japanese belief system. For example, in a survey conducted in 1991, 107 and 94 million Japanese identified themselves as Shinto and Buddhist respectively-when the total population of Japan was only 124 million(n7). "Syncretism" is an appropriate descriptor for the general spiritual orientation of the Japanese.

[5] Shinto is one of the few surviving animistic faiths in the world. Despite official attempts either to suppress or appropriate its ideology, Shinto has survived in Japan into the twenty-first century. Its origins

predate Japanese history, and it was probably brought to the archipelago by early Mongol settlers in the Yamato Valley. It is generally accepted to have no dogma or moral doctrine, except for its tenets of worshipping and honouring the kami (gods), respect for nature, and the practice of purification rituals. Shinto shrines are dotted around the countryside in Japan, and also in the many densely populated cities—a testament to the resilience of this millennia-old belief system in adapting to a hyper-technological present.

[6] The core ideas that inform our understanding of "natural" Shinto were developed by Moto-ori Norinaga in the Tokugawa period.(n8) A student of Kamo no Mabuchi, Norinaga argued for a return to the idyllic simplicity of ancient Japan and the removal of foreign elements from Japanese culture. Through extensive studies of the Kojiki, a book that could be described as the bible of Shinto, Norinaga developed his thesis that in the remote past, (Japanese) people possessed a "kami-given nature" that allowed them to live in perfect harmony with their natural surroundings. Part of the success of his teachings stemmed from the emotionality of his appeal and the sense of nostalgia he invoked. Jun'ichi Isomae suggests that Norinaga's "affective" approach and conflation of the natural and the divine "laid the basis for the emotional debates on the nature of the heroic age that repeatedly played out during the postwar era."(n9) Before Norinaga, Japanese history had mainly been taken from the Nihon shoki, 'Chronicle of Japan', written in 720 C.E. in Chinese. The Kojiki (literally 'Record of Ancient Things') was completed in 712 C.E. under the auspices of the imperial Yamato court, and details the creation myths of Izanagi and Izanami and events in "the age of the kami," including how the grandson of Amaterasu Omikami, Emperor Jimmu, was set upon the imperial throne.

[7] In these ancient times, naturally occurring phenomena that were particularly awe-inspiring were given the title of kami, or gods, and were sometimes thought to possess the power of speech. Around the time these beliefs arose, during the early Jomon (10,000 B.C.E.-300 B.C.E) and Yayoi periods (300 B.C.E.-300 C.E.), it was believed that respect for the kami was inseparably a part of the people's love of nature. Norinaga describes kami as:

The deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient texts and also the spirits enshrined in the shrines; furthermore, among all kinds of beings—including not only human beings but also such objects as birds, beasts, trees, grass, seas, mountains, and so forth—any being whatsoever which possesses some eminent quality out of the ordinary, and is awe-inspiring, is called kami. (Eminence here does not refer simply to superiority in nobility, goodness, or meritoriousness. Evil or queer things, if they are extraordinarily awe-inspiring, are also called kami.)(n10)

[8] He continues that the written character for kami, another way of reading the Chinese character for shin, can be literally translated as "above" which gives rise to the interpretation of "god" or "deity." Yet kami are not omniscient and distant in the Christian or Muslim sense, but were thought of in a similar way to the Greek gods: capable of human emotion and accessible to mortal communication. This relationship was characterised in terms of oya-ko, as ancestor to descendent or parent to child.(n11) There was a sense of familiarity and friendliness between humans and kami; the kami were respected and honoured, but usually not feared.

[9] Representations of kami and the natural world in Miyazaki's films express an underlying belief of the early Shinto worldview, that is, continuity between humanity and nature. This concept is also encapsulated by the Japanese word nagare, meaning "flow," and leads to the conception of vital connections between the divine nature of the kami, and by extension the natural world, and humanity (through respectful rituals); between post-mortem souls and the living (such as the ie construct, or ancestor/descendent link); and between the inner and outer worlds (as expressed through ideas about pollution and purity). The

ancient Japanese did not strictly divide their world into the material and the spiritual, nor between this world and another perfect realm. Miyazaki is very much aware of this in his work, saying in an interview about Princess Mononoke that "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"(n12).

[10] Yet Miyazaki doesn't like to identify his themes with the religiosity or "official" versions of Shinto. While referring to his Totoros as "nature spirits" and grounding his film in the mise-en-scène of a rural period, Miyazaki was adamant that "this movie [Totoro] has nothing to do with that [Shinto] or any other religion."(n13) His is a common response by Japanese to direct questions about the ideology of Shinto:

My understanding of the history of Shinto is that many centuries ago [the originators of Japan] used Shinto to unify the country and that it ended up inspiring many wars of aggression against our neighbours. So, there is still a great deal of ambiguity and contradiction within Japan about our relationship to Shinto, many wish to deny it, to reject it.(n14)

[11] The fundamental ethos of Shinto arose from a non-organised, pre-intellectual understanding of nature and this is something that informs Miyazaki's work. Helen McCarthy reads Totoro as "deliberately sidelin[ing] religion in favour of nature... the trappings of rural religious traditions are clearly visible, but as far as the plot is concerned, they're decorative, not functional... Religion is a human construct and has nothing to do with nature. Nature spirits live outside it, creatures of simple goodwill who mean no harm"(n15). Despite Miyazaki's ambiguity with identifying his work with the ethos of Shinto, their presence imbues them with some importance. His films seem to offer a way forward for Japanese people and global audiences to enjoy their animistic and beneficent view of the world without the trappings of religion.

Purity and Pollution: Nausicaa

[12] In order to illustrate the moral world of the ancient Japanese, the creation myth of Izanagi and Izanami in the Kojiki plays out notions of good and evil, purity and pollution. The myth goes like this: when Izanami gave birth to the kami of fire, she suffered greatly and eventually "died" and entered yomi-no-kuni, the realm of the dead. She warned Izanagi not to look upon her in such a state of pollution (i.e., death), but he missed her so greatly he followed her into the netherworld. When she discovered that he had broken his promise, she pursued him vengefully and he only just escaped. Back in this world, Izanagi was "seized with regret" and felt he had "brought on himself ill-luck," and undertook the "purification of his august body ... from its pollutions and impurities."(n16) Izanagi then washed himself in a river mouth and from the filth and defilement of his journey to yomi, Magatsubi-no-Kami was born, "the mysterious spirit of evils." To counter this, Naobi-no-Kami was immediately born, "the mysterious spirit of rectifying evils." Various other kami were also born from these ablutions, including Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi and Susa-no-o, the gods of the sun, the moon, and the storms respectively.(n17)

[13] In his studies of this ancient text, Norinaga used this story to draw several conclusions about the moral world of the ancient Japanese: first, tsumi or "evil"

encompasses more than just moral transgressions. It implies spiritual and physical impurity or filthiness, and includes natural disasters, disease and contact with death. Secondly, such evils should be ritually purified or cleansed (tellingly, the rituals for purification from filth or from rectifying evil are identical). And finally, good (yogoto) encompasses spiritual and physical cleanliness and harmony. This definition can be seen linguistically in so far as akashi (bright), kiyoshi (pure, clean) and naoshi (upright) were used interchangeably with yogoto in the ancient Kojiki.(n18)

[14] Hence, the true purpose of purification (harae) according to Norinaga is to remove what is evil or polluted, in order that something good or bright can take its place. Such a moral universe is quite different

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from a Christian one, as there is no Original Sin. The nature of humanity is considered essentially good and pure. Shinto holds that evil does not stain one's soul, it only obscures it temporarily. Like a mirror, the sheen and brightness may be dulled by pollution or dust, but it can be wiped clean again. That even the powerful deity Izanagi was defiled by his contact with death shows that this faith recognises evil as an inevitable part of living.

[15] Miyazaki has said that there was one big event that gave him the inspiration for Nausicaa: the pollution of Minamata Bay with mercury in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of serious health concerns, people stopped fishing in the bay, but strangely the fish stocks in the area increased dramatically. Miyazaki said the news "sent shivers up my spine," and he admired the resilience of other living creatures, that they could absorb such poisons and survive.(n19) In the thirtieth century world of Nausicaa, the world has been destroyed in a human-inflicted holocaust called The Seven Days of Fire. Yet, instead of a dry, radioactive wasteland, the land is abundant with life. Toxins have caused widespread plant and insect mutations until a giant breed of insectoid Ohmu arises to rule the planet and a new ecosystem evolves that is poisonous to humans, variously called the Sea of Corruption, the Toxic Jungle, the Acid Sea and the Wasteland. So now it is humans who must adapt to the by-products of a different species. This kind of ecological influence is apparent in Nausicaa's many symbolic moments, which, as Paul Wells suggests, "become the locus for narrational emphasis and the nexus of spiritual and philosophic ideas."(n20) As well as carrying the trope of the messiah, the character of the princess embodies certain ideas about how to live with the natural world. Her characterisation can be read as signifying transitional and purifying aspects, and the unusual power she possesses as affirmative of the "rightness" of her mode of thought.

[16] The first glimpse of Nausicaa is as she circles high above a verdant landscape in her white glider. She descends, lands lightly and enters the weird forest, walking wordlessly through cathedral-like caverns, collecting phosphorescent plant samples, and delightedly discovering the shed carapace of one of the giant insectoid Ohmu. She pries free the transparent eye casing and rests beneath it during the snowstorm of pollen as the mushibayashi plants release their afternoon spores. We can see in this whimsical exploration of her world that Nausicaa takes a scientific and beatific interest in the forest, an attitude that parallels the Shinto world-view expressed by Norinaga: "this heaven and earth and all things therein are without exception strange and marvellous when examined carefully."(n21) He describes the wondrous nature of things as "kami-given," and in the world of Nausicaa, the princess' heroic status lies in her ability to see this essentially good nature in all things. While other characters either attack the forest or avoid it completely, Nausicaa is able to see what Norinaga called *magokoro*, "the sincere heart," and she values all life.

[17] Between Nausicaa's home, the Valley of the Wind and the Jungle lies a netherland of sandy desert where nothing grows; yet Nausicaa traverses this area every day in her glider. In a discussion of marginality in Japanese culture, anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney describes how purifying and polluting forces are those that fall in the gaps between important classifications in society-particularly between the clearly defined spheres of the dirty "outside" (*soto*) and the clean "inside" (*uchi*). These transitional areas harbour what she terms "cultural germs."(n22) In her study of various healing deities, both Buddhist and Shinto, Ohnuki-Tierney found that each one was associated with these border-areas. And this is where Nausicaa's powers lie; like a healing deity, Nausicaa is the embodiment of purification, making amends for the *tsumi* of the Torumekians and Pejites.

[18] In Nausicaa, pollution comes not from the reversal of power relations between humans and insects, but in the interruption of the continuity or *nagare* of nature. The violent Torumekians and Pejites, with their insistence on using the warships and weapons of the Ancients, continue to fight the Jungle and each other. Commander Kushana of Torumekia goes to the extreme of rousing a dormant God Soldier that laid

the earth to waste millennia ago. And the Pejites commit the sadistic cruelty of torturing an Ohmu pupa in order to provoke the adult Ohmu on a murderous rampage through the Valley. The Valley people understand the horror of what has been done. Nausicaa'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 [the God Soldier]?"

[19] The Ohmu and the princess also share an important link in terms of purification. In her secret laboratory, Nausicaa has been growing spores collected from the Jungle. Given clean water and soil, she finds that the fungi and plants do not give off poisonous vapours. She concludes that it is the soil that is toxic, not the plants that grow in it. Later, after an aerial battle, she crash-lands in the jungle and finds herself, along with a Pejite boy she was trying to save, in a subterranean cavern of clean water and non-toxic sands. They realise that the entire forest operates as a purifying organism; the trees absorb the poisons from the soil, crystallise and neutralise them, before eventually dissolving into sand. The Toxic Jungle is effectively purifying the planet.

[20] The Ohmu are aware of this and act to defend the forest, and thus the earth, from the actions of humans. They are a god-like race, intricately connected to the new ecosystem and able to telepathically feel the pain of all creatures in the Jungle, not just their own kind. Despite suffering from the aggression of the Torumekians and Pejites, the Ohmu are not a vengeful race. They acknowledge the sacrifice Nausicaa makes by returning life to her body. The golden field they create for her offers hope and a message of unification. They have seen her magokoro.

Oya-ko: My Neighbor Totoro and Laputa

[21] The distinction between nature's kami and the spirits of ancestors was often slight in ancient times. In contrast to the western concept of a creator/creature relationship between humanity and god, in Shinto the Japanese people are held to be the children of the kami, and as such, the kami are their ultimate ancestors. Norinaga used the term oya-ko to describe this divine ancestral link, where oya means one who gives birth, and ko, one who is born:

Generally in ancient times, oya referred not only to one's father and mother, but also to one's ancestors in any distant generation. There are many indications of this in the old writings. Thus the father and the mother represented only one generation of the oya in the above sense. But since they are the most intimate oya among others, they came to monopolise the name oya in later ages ... Likewise, ko did not simply mean one's own children, but also one's descendents in successive generations.(n23)

[22] The most apparent instance of this kami-human lineage in Japanese society lies in the emphasised heavenly origin of the Imperial family. As the Yamato Clan rose to power in the early part of the first millennium, they claimed direct descent from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Omikami. Even before the consolidation of the Yamato clan, the early Japanese lived in loose clan-groups called uji, which had their own kami who was worshipped as an ancestor and protector. Even into the 1980s, most neighbourhoods had a local shrine devoted to the ujigami, or the kami of the uji(n24).

[23] These antique elements of familial and community organisation form the basis of the dozoku family descent system, still a part of modern Japanese society to some extent. An essentially indigenous system, it was reinforced and modified by the introduction of Confucian ideology in around 600 C.E. The basic unit of the system is the ie, roughly translated as "family" or "house," although it carries more of a sense of temporal continuity than its Western equivalent. Members of an ie include the living members, those who came before (both the recently dead and the ancestors) and those yet to be born. It is the primary responsibility of the living to ensure that the ie continues through both ancestor worship, lest they are forgotten; and arranging for the ie to survive into the future.(n25) The dozoku is an umbrella grouping of ie that have branched off from one main family.

[24] During the revival of Shinto as State Shinto in the period leading up to the Second World War, the dozoku kinship system was drawn on heavily to support the "divine right" of the Japanese aggression. Most Japanese homes had a Shinto "god-shelf" usually associated with the imperial ancestress Amaterasu Omikami, which symbolically linked each home to the imperial family.(n28) This rhetoric promoted the idea that all Japanese are essentially one family, one dozoku, and hence all ultimately descended from the gods. However, the ie is primarily a rural construct,(n29) and as the vast majority of Japanese now live in cities, this family system may have lost its currency. Urbanisation in Japan took place very rapidly. At the turn of the century, there began a social shift from farming communities to atomised, metropolitan living, but it was in the 1960s that the ratio of urban to rural residents rapidly swung to seven to three.(n30) The ie was legally abolished in the 1947 Constitution written at the beginning of the U.S. Occupation.

[25] Laputa initially seems to be less relevant to discussions of Japanese society as it is based on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and the landscape is modelled on a Welsh mining town with distinctly Caucasian characters. Yet on the floating island of Laputa, there are hints of Japanese culture. This leads to a possible interpretation of the island as a metaphor for Japan's past: a powerful nation (Japan had never been occupied by a foreign power before the U.S. Occupation in 1947), isolated from the rest of the world (such as during the Tokugawa period), and engulfed by the spiritual force of a giant tree (its "embarrassing" Shinto heritage that post World War II governments have often tried to stamp out). Orphaned Sheeta's royal blood bestows upon her supernatural powers via the Levystone, a piece of Laputa she wears around her neck. Her royalty could be read as relating to the unbroken succession of Emperors, while the Levystone, like the symbolic objects of the Japanese Imperial Family (the sword, the jewel and the mirror) operates as a physical link with the past. The ancient civilisation from which she descends has mysteriously vanished but her talisman leads her, and the villains hot on her heels, to rediscover the mythical island-half world-tree, half world-destroying weapon.

[26] The majestic camphor tree often plays an important role as signifying both kami and ancestors. In the case of *Totoro*, the giant tree is the home of the King of the Forest, while in *Laputa*, it is the repository of the spirits of Sheeta's ancestors, the rulers of a mighty civilisation. The "monumental tree" motif appears in many anime and manga artists' work, not just Miyazaki's; for example, Takashi Nakamura's *A Tree of Palme* (2001) offers a twisted futuristic take on this with the protagonist literally made of wood. The tree is often portrayed as containing the spirit of the earth in a Gaia-esque sense. It is an ancient symbol of the continuity and sacrality of life, for example Mircea Eliade proposed the term *axis mundi* for frequent mythological imagery of cosmic trees. The tree is profoundly important in Shinto cosmology as it is symbolic of the kami's most highly venerated powers of productivity and fertility. The *Kojiki* refers to a deity "Takagi," whose name literally means "Lofty Tree." Norinaga interpreted this deity to be the same as Musubi-no-Kami ("High-Integrating Deity") which was the very first deity, and produced Izanagi and Izanami. So, following Norinaga's interpretation, Takagi could be read as "Lofty Tree Deity" and could be imagined as the personification of a cosmic tree.(n31) So the "world tree" has a twofold significance: first, as the essence of nature's life-giving quality, and second, as both a deity and an ancestor, and thus the manifestation of the temporal continuation of the divine ie.

[27] The 1950s rural location of *Totoro* has been modelled on Sayama Hills, now engulfed by the sprawling metropolis of Tokyo, but in Miyazaki's childhood was a mix of farmland and ancient woodlands. There are shimboku, trees marked with a long rope of rice straw (*shimenawa*) and folded paper streamers that indicate they contain important spirits. The appearance of traditional elements, while not central to the plot, yet have an ubiquity that is an accurate representation of their situation in Japan. All over Japan-from city to country-there are a great many shrines and torii gates, and to this day construction companies will use Shinto priests to appease the kami of trees that must be felled in certain areas. Stuart Picken has

suggested that some of the very earliest Shinto shrines probably took the form of a himorogi, "a sacred, unpolluted place bounded by rope and surrounded by evergreen plants and trees."(n32)

[28] The continued popularity of My Neighbor Totoro, manifest in the easy availability of film-related merchandise, could be read as nostalgia for a time when people lived more closely with nature and had an extended family to draw on, as well as the more obvious yearning for the magical state of childhood. The house the Kusakabe family move to is very old and traditional, with tatami mats, sliding screen doors and a communal bath. Here we can see the spare lines of a traditional Japanese home. Yet it is inhabited with magical creatures that only children can see. Miyazaki describes his view of nostalgia to Tom Mes:

I believe nostalgia has many appearances and that it's not just the privilege of adults. An adult can feel nostalgia for a specific time in their lives, but I think children too can have nostalgia. It's one of mankind's most shared emotions. It's one of the things that makes us human and because of that it's difficult to define. It was when I saw the film Nostalghia by Tarkovsky that I realised that nostalgia is universal. Even though we use it in Japan, the word 'nostalgia' is not a Japanese word.(n33)

[29] Considering the emphasis Shinto places on this world, i.e., not yearning for a paradisaal afterlife or a garden of Eden, it could be understood that there was no need for the term "nostalgia" in Japan.(n34) It is relevant that this nostalgic film was made in 1988, in the peak of the bubble, the Bubble, a period of economic growth described by some as "the greatest concentration of wealth in the history of the world."(n35) Anthropologist Aoki Tamotsu has described 1980s Japan as defined not by its own affluence, but by its production of nostalgia for an earlier age (possibly invented or imagined). The 1980s was, in Tamotsu's phrase, a culture of "maturation and forfeiture."(n36) The nostalgia that is expressed stems from the sadness of severing spatial and temporal links with the natural world and the past respectively. In Japan's wholesale move to robot technology and a "new is better" mode of modernisation, Miyazaki's films regret leaving behind the richness of a childhood spent in the woodlands, or the heartfelt spirituality that comes with being a part of nature and of social tradition.

Respect for Nature: Princess Mononoke

[30] Miyazaki has deliberately chosen the temporal setting for Mononoke-the Muromachi era (1392-1573). Historians describe it as a time of great upheaval when the relationship between humanity and nature was radically changing in Japan. "Hand-cannons" or firearms had been imported by the Portuguese in 1543 and the Iron Age was dawning. However, Miyazaki is not attempting historical realism in his depiction of the era; rather, he appears to illustrate a power shift in the growing conflict between the natural world and newly industrialised humans. And so, it was the time when humans declared war on the kamigami, the wild gods. Miyazaki comments:

I think that the Japanese did kill shishigami [Deer God] around the time of the Muromachi era. And then we stopped being in awe of forests ... From ancient times up to a certain time in the medieval period, there was a boundary beyond which humans should not enter. Within this boundary was our territory, so we ruled it as the human's world with our rules, but beyond this road, we couldn't do anything even if a crime had been committed since it was no longer the human's world ... After shishigami's head was returned, nature regenerated. But it has become a tame, non-frightening forest of the kind we are accustomed to seeing. The Japanese have been remaking the Japanese landscape in this way.(n37)

[31] Miyazaki's sympathies lie with the pre-modern world. The two heroes are both taken from this wild time before the forests were subjugated. Princess Mononoke of the title (which literally means "possessed princess"), also called Sen, is modelled on a Jomon period pottery figure, and Ashitaka's people, the Emishi, are suggestive of the Ainu or other groups that, like the forests, were pushed back by the growing Yamato civilization. Linking these two are the markings shared by Hii-Sama and Sen-they both wear

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decorative headgear. Even the *didaribotchi*, the night-time manifestation of the Spirit of the Forest, bears distinctive rope-like marks on its body similar to those that characterised the pottery of the Jomon era. They stand in for the original state of Japan when hunter-gatherer societies lived in relative harmony with nature. Miyazaki has said before that he sees the agricultural settlement of Japan as the beginning of the end of the reign of the forest. In an interview on the ecological world of *Nausicaa*, the ideas of which strongly inform *Princess Mononoke*, he says, "I was trying to summarise the history of humans since the beginning of farming, in pre-historic times-since we first began to tamper with the world ... The existence of humans became complicated with the start of farming." (n38) He has also admitted to being heavily influenced by 1970s conservationism and Marxism.

[32] It is not only the respect for *kami* that Miyazaki uses these characters to represent. They also manifest ideas about a non-intellectual understanding of spirituality that divorces it from institutionalised religion *per se*. Miyazaki has depicted the spirits of the forest in various ways-from the *shishigami*, which is a gentle giver and taker of life, to the active, violent wolf and boar gods. But he believes his use of the *kodama* was the most effective:

The idea came to me because what I was interested in portraying was a sense of the depth and the mystery, the friendliness and the awe-inspiringness of a forest, and so I came up with the idea of a *kodama*. I think you can draw all the huge, giant trees in the world that you want to. It won't have the same impact. And I wanted to choose a form that represented the liveliness and the freedom and the innocence that a baby represents. And that's why I chose that form. (n39)

[33] In a world where magic exists and gods walk the earth, it makes sense for humans to commune with this liminal realm. So, in the Emishi village *Hii-Sama* is respected as she consults her divining stones, and her words to Ashitaka are filled with portent: "You cannot change your fate. You can, though, rise to meet it. Go, and see with eyes unclouded."

[34] This kind of mystically-oriented intuition has been identified by contemporary Shinto scholar Stuart Picken as key to Shinto experience:

The sense of the mysterious at the heart of life, the desire to commune with it, and the willingness to express dependence upon it is the root from which all mythological expressions of religious experience spring. The way of the *kami* thus arose in the Japanese people of ancient times from their reverence for and pre-intellectual awareness of the structures of being that surrounded them. (n40)

[35] But when Ashitaka relays his purpose to Lady Eboshi: "to see with eyes unclouded by hate," she laughs. She rejects, and via her scorn the pragmatism of modernity rejects the simplicity of early spiritual thought in favour of the pragmatism and rationality privileged by modernity.

[36] Eboshi, leader of the iron-mongering *Tatara* clan (whose name is perilously close to the *tatari*, or cursed god, we meet in the first scene) and the loci of "modern" ideas, admits she would burn the forest down to get to the iron ore in the mountains, and is prepared to cut the head off the *shishigami* to secure a future for her people. She performs this brutal deed brazenly, calling to her hunters as she marks the transforming *kami* with her rifle, "Watch closely. This is how you kill a god." Yet, Eboshi is not without "good" qualities: caring for lepers, empowering women to be more than brothel-workers, building a community in a hostile world. She epitomises the modern drive that moves towards progress at any cost. Miyazaki has described her as a "contemporary" character:

I conceived of Eboshi as the most contemporary character in [*Princess Mononoke*], and I say "contemporary" and "modern" because she no longer is the slightest bit interested in the salvation of her

own soul. She kills off a god with the force of her own will. The monk Jigo is too afraid to do the killing himself, and so he makes others do his dirty work for him.(n41)

[37] Eboshi's actions pose the question: which is more important-humanity's survival or nature's? Eboshi signifies a break from the pre-modern past as she moves into the non-ritualistic, non-spiritual future. And, importantly, she is not judged for this as her character both has a worthy justification and also learns from the disastrous consequences of her action. Miyazaki admits that "there can be no happy ending to the war between the rampaging forest gods and humanity"(n42). So while in Miyazaki's vision these two important tenets of Shinto, respecting the kami and love of nature, are under threat from modernisation and industrialisation there is a sense that, like the infinitely accommodating faith of Shinto, there is a position where the conflict can be reconciled. This is achieved not by choosing sides, but by respecting the values of both forces: "Even in the midst of hatred and slaughter, there is still much to live for. Wonderful encounters and beautiful things still exist."(n43)

Conclusions

[38] Reading the symbolism and narrative of the films, I have described how aspects of this pre-modern spiritualism have been transformed and manifested visually for a largely urban audience, both in Japan and overseas. Beginning with the sense of wonder and awe in the natural world, Princess Mononoke had a number of symbolically resonant moments when the human characters were indeed respectful and awestruck by manifestation of natural forces and creatures, such as the kodama, the didaribotchi and the animal kami. The removal of pollution to restore the essentially pure state of nature, and of the human spirit, were abundantly present in Nausicaa. Through the princess' actions and those of the Ohmu, the irradiated and polluted state of the Toxic Jungle were gradually reversed and the tsumi was expunged. And finally, the sense of continuity that has informed the social structure of Japanese society was found to have its roots in the ancient world where Shinto was first practiced. In Laputa, this was manifested through the heavy burden of lineage that Sheeta must bear-her ancestors were both incredibly powerful, yet had the capacity for great violence. Totoro took a gentler approach and suggested that we are spiritually descended from the natural world as apparent in the kinship the little girls feel for the forest spirit Totoro.

[39] The key to Miyazaki's work lies in his knack of transformation and transfusion. He transforms and reinvigorates the tenets of Shinto and also elements of Japanese myth such as goblins and gods. He juxtaposes these with global culture, taking inspiration from American science fiction writers (e.g., Brian Aldiss' Hothouse), Russian filmmakers (like Andrei Tarkovsky's Nostalgia), and Greek myths (e.g., Homer's Odysseus). His films do not rework specific stories-rather he draws from these sources to create a hybrid Japanese "modern myth" that is accessible (in different ways) to post-industrialised audiences all over the world. Miyazaki does not take the Disney path of producing sanitised children's stories. He is adamantly opposed to simplifying the world for children: "to make a true children's film is a real daunting challenge and this is because we need to clearly portray the essence of a very complex world."(n44) His work can be seen as simultaneously reinventing and subverting cultural myths and exposing the complexity of life's problems, rather than simplifying them.

[40] Miyazaki is cinematically practicing the ancient form of Shinto, as it was before it was organised (i.e., appropriated) by the growing Yamato clan and Japanese civilisation. He is reaching back for this natural Shinto which emphasised an intuitive, non-dogmatic relationship with nature, an almost child-like state-pre-intellectual, magical, accepting. Shinto has been a part of Japanese culture for more than two millennia, and has provided a cultural framework for the integration of new ideas, while maintaining the essence of old ones. So, aspects of Shinto can be read as informing Miyazaki's work in terms of their themes, concerns and messages. And the fundamental ideas of Shinto, as described in Norinaga's

"Ancient Way," have been transformed in these works to offer the same values in the new context of post-industrial, globalised Japan.

A temporal representation of the ie on the left(n26) and a cultural structure on the right(n27)

Notes

(n1) Hayao Miyazaki in "An Interview with Hayao Miyazaki," *Mononoke-hime Theater Program*, July 1997. Edited by Deborah Goldsmith. Available at: www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/m%5fon%5fmh.html

(n2) Margaret Talbot, "The Auteur of Anime," *New Yorker*, 17 January 2005.

(n3) In an interview, Miyazaki has said: "I'm only worried about how my film would be viewed in Japan. Frankly, I don't worry too much about how it plays elsewhere." ("Japan's Animated Film Hit Silver Screen," *CNN Today*, 3 October 1997).

(n4) Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 1999), 186.

(n5) Susan Napier, "Confronting Master Narratives: History As Vision in Miyazaki Hayao's Cinema of De-assurance," *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 9,2 (2001).

(n6) Agency for Cultural Affairs, *Japanese Religion* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972), 14.

(n7) Joy Hendry, *Understanding Japanese Society* (Kent: Croom Helm, 1987), 116.

(n8) Jun 'Ichi Isomae, "Reappropriating the Japanese Myths: Moto-ori Norinaga and the Creation Myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1. 27, 1-2 (2000).

(n9) Isomae, "Japanese Myths," 16.

(n10) Moto-ori Norinaga quoted in Shigeru Matsumoto, *Moto-ori Norinaga: 1730-1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 84.

(n11) Norinaga quoted in Matsumoto, *Norinaga*, 115.

(n12) David Chute, "Organic Machine: The World of Hayao Miyazaki," *Film Comment* 34 6 (November/December 1998), 64.

(n13) McCarthy, *Myazaki*, 121.

(n14) Mark Vallen and Jeannine Thorpe, "Spirited Away: Miyazaki at the Hollywood Premiere," *The Black Moon*, 13 September 2002. Available at: www.theblackmoon.com/Deadmoon/spiritedaway.html

(n15) McCarthy, *Myazaki*, 122-23.

(n16) *Kojiki*, I, X, quoted in Nelson, J. *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* (Seattle/London: University of Washington Press, 1996), 102.

(n17) Norinaga quoted in Matsumoto, *Norinaga*, 98.

(n18) *Kojiki*, quoted in Nelson, *Shinto Shrine*, 98.

(n19) McCarthy, Miyazaki, 74.

(n20) Paul Wells, "Hayao Miyazaki: Floating Worlds, Floating Signifiers," *Art + Design*, 32, 9 (November 2001), 23.

(n21) Norinaga quoted in Matsumoto, Norinaga, 96.

(n22) Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Illness and Culture in Contemporary Japan: An Anthropological View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), chap. 2.

(n23) Norinaga quoted in Matsumoto, Norinaga, 115.

(n24) Hendry, *Understanding*, 105.

(n25) Hendry, *Understanding*, 22.

(n26) Hendry, *Understanding*, 25.

(n27) Akitoshi Shimizu, "Ie and Dozoku: Family and Descent in Japan," *Current Anthropology* (Supplement: An Anthropological Profile of Japan), 28,4 (August-October 1987), s86. Shimizu, "Ie," s86.

(n28) Hendry, *Understanding*, 29.

(n29) Shimizu, "Ie," s86.

(n30) Agency for Cultural Affairs, 91.

(n31) Basil Chamberlain quoted in Ichiro Hori, *Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change*, Edited by J. Kitagawa and A. Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 192.

(n32) Stuart Picken, *Shinto: Japan's Spiritual Roots* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1980), 49.

(n33) Tom Mes, "Hayao Miyazaki Interview," *Midnight Eye*, 1 July 2002. Available at: www.midnighteye.com/interviews/hayao%5fmizaki.shtml

(n34) For a further discussion of nostalgia, see Peter Nosco, *Remembering Paradise: Nativism and Nostalgia in 18th Century Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1990).

(n35) Karl Greenfeld, *Speed Tribes* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), ix.

(n36) Aoki Tamotsu, "Murakami Haruki," in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, edited by John Treat (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 268.

(n37) Miyazaki, interview 1997.

(n38) Ryo Saitani, "I Understand Nausicaa a Bit More Than I Did a Little While Ago: Long Interview with Hayao Miyazaki," *Comic Box* (Special Memorial Issue: The Finale of Nausicaa), January 1995. Available at: www.comicbox.co.jp/e-nau/e-nau.html

(n39) Miyazaki quoted in Sara Hammel, "An Interview with Hayao Miyazaki," *US News Online*, 27 September 1999.

(n40) Picken, *Shinto*, 75.

(n41) Miyazaki quoted in Vallen and Thorpe, "*Spirited Away*."

(n42) Studio Ghibli, *Princess Mononoke comes to America* (Tokyo: Studio Ghibli, 1997), 4.

(n43) Studio Ghibli, *Mononoke*, 4.

(n44) Miyazaki quoted in Vallen and Thorpe, "*Spirited Away*."

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