The Environmental Ethos of Miyazaki's Worlds: Exploring How Ecological Themes in Anime Can Reimagine Humanity's Approach to Contemporary Environmental Issues

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Abstract

This study explores ecological themes in Hayao Miyazaki's films and their potential to inform contemporary approaches to environmental challenges faced by humanity. By analysing five of Miyazaki's feature-length ecologically focused anime—*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, My Neighbor Totoro, Princess Mononoke, Spirited Away,* and *The Boy and the Heron*—the research identifies recurring codes and thematic elements that reflect Miyazaki's ever-evolving eco-philosophy. The study employs a flexible approach to the thematic analysis framework in order to examine Shinto-inspired symbolism, landscape settings, character traits and development, uncovering insights into Miyazaki's vision of humanity's interconnectedness with nature. While not overtly didactic, the findings of this study underscore these films' philosophical foundations in his conception of the mutual dependence of humans and the environment, the consequences of human exploitation, and the spiritual or animistic dimension of nature as a source of resilience and healing. Although deeply rooted in a Japanese cultural context, the ecological insights embedded in these narratives hold broader global implications. By highlighting the cultural, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of Miyazaki's worldview and storytelling, this research offers perspectives on cultivating ecological awareness and addressing urgent environmental issues via the cinematic medium.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Climate change is no longer a distant concept; it has become an undeniable reality. Its origins can be traced back to the early 1800s, during the industrialisation era when humanity's reliance on fossil fuels and other environmentally harmful practices led to significant carbon dioxide emissions (Pidcock, 2016). As humanity asserted its dominance over the Earth through deforestation, chemical pollution, and nuclear detonations, the dawn of a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene—emerged (Press, 2023). While some experts locate the beginning of this epoch between 1945 and 1950, coinciding with the environmental consequences of the Second World War and the end of the Holocene (Cole & Walker, 2022), many other scholars in the geoscientific community argue that the Anthropocene remains an informal chronological designation. As such, it is more accurately described as a geological event rather than a formally recognised epoch (Gibbard et al., 2022). This event not only highlights human influence on the planet but also forces us to confront critical questions about life, spirituality, and the intricate connection between humans and nature (Yoneyama, 2021).

Film, as a medium, holds immense potential to foster a deeper understanding of social, cultural, political, and environmental structures (James et al., 2011). Within this context, this thesis examines the works of Hayao Miyazaki, the renowned Japanese animator and director of 'eco-fables,' whose narratives challenge conventional perspectives and inspire a re-evaluation of humanity's relationship with the natural world (Wang & Zhao, 2017). Miyazaki's films are celebrated for their animistic and ecocentric narratives, making them a rich subject for exploring ecological themes and their implications for contemporary environmental issues. Indeed, ecology forms a central motif in Miyazaki's storytelling, alongside themes such as existentialism, politics, technology, feminism, and the dichotomy of love and hate. Influenced by Sasuke Nakao's hypothesis of landscapes as entities embodying the coexistence of animals and plants, and Ryotaro Shiba's advocacy for a courteous relationship with nature (Mayumi et al., 2005), Miyazaki's eco-philosophy shapes his films, embedding them with cultural and ethical dimensions. This study seeks to unpack these dimensions and examine how his films communicate ecological ideas to global audiences.

The thesis is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the director's environmental ethos. It begins by exploring Miyazaki's cultural and professional background, along with the influences that shaped his animistic eco-philosophy and ethical stance on humanity's relationship

with nature. It then contrasts Miyazaki's ecological worldview with Western perspectives that often commodify nature. Furthermore, the study discusses the Shinto, political, and cultural influences that underpin his storytelling and analyses how the historical settings of five key films reveal the complex consequences of human actions. Finally, the study concludes by synthesising Miyazaki's environmental ethos into three overarching themes that offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary ecological challenges.

To achieve this, the research employs the flexible framework of thematic analysis to identify the codes and themes embedded in Miyazaki's narratives (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Given the complexity of his storytelling, the analysis incorporates detailed plot summaries to elucidate the significance of these codes. However, rather than adhering rigidly to a structured theoretical model of thematic analysis, the study employs an adaptive approach, allowing for a more nuanced engagement with the multilayered meanings present in Miyazaki's works.

For the analysis, I have selected five of Miyazaki's feature films that best represent his dynamic eco-philosophy and embody various forms of eco-consciousness. A brief synopsis of each film is provided to clarify the selection of these films as the study's primary material, with more detailed analyses presented in subsequent chapters. This material will help establish the relevance of these films to the exploration of Miyazaki's ecological themes.

1. ***Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984):** Set in a dystopian future, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* draws inspiration from a range of sources, including Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), as well as the science fiction and fantasy works of William Golding, Ursula Le Guin, Isaac Asimov, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Homer. While the protagonist Nausicaä shares characteristics with Miyazaki's early production characters—such as Lana from *Conan, The Boy in Future* and Fio from *Porco Rosso*—her creation was significantly influenced by the twelfth-century Japanese folktale *Mushi-mezuru Himegimi (The Lady Who Loved Insects),* and Homer's *Odýsseia (Odyssey)* (Cavallaro, 2015). The story follows Nausicaä as she explores the connection between the toxic, decaying *fukai* jungle (also known as the rotten sea) and the survival of humanity. Nausicaä, though living in a world poisoned by pollution, finds herself drawn to the jungle for comfort. Through her exploration, she uncovers *fukai's* ability to purify itself and realises that humanity, too, can cleanse itself of its inner pollution, hatred, and conflict; and learn to coexist harmoniously (Palmer, 2021). The film urges viewers to reflect on the possibility of human coexistence without succumbing to hatred and encourages them to consider their actions in this context,

making Nausicaä's journey a compelling metaphor for the potential reconciliation between humanity and nature.

2. ***My Neighbour Totoro* (1988):** Set in rural Japan during the 1950s, *My Neighbor Totoro* depicts nature as an integral part of daily life, intertwining the natural world with the lives of the characters. The film incorporates a magical realist element as it follows two young sisters, Satsuki and Mei, on an enchanted journey to venture into a world that bridges reality and the supernatural. The narrative draws upon child psychology, showing how children cope with their fears and anxieties by finding comfort in nature. Totoro, the mystical creature they encounter, symbolises this connection with the natural world, offering them solace and support in overcoming their emotional struggles. To connect with nature, as demonstrated by their interactions with Totoro, requires openness, vulnerability, imagination, and courage (S. J. Napier, 2005). In the film, Totoro is interpreted as a *kami*, or divine spirit. The girls' father teaches them to show reverence to Totoro, recognising him as the master of the forest and the guardian of nature (Palmer, 2021). By embedding Shinto spirituality within the narrative, Miyazaki grounds it in a deep cultural appreciation for nature, aiming to encourage children to cultivate a worldview that counters the modern disconnection from the natural world.

3. ***Princess Mononoke* (1997):** Set against the backdrop of a mystical forest filled with spirits and mythical creatures, *Princess Mononoke* explores the complex and intricate relationship between humans and nature. The nearby town, Tataraba (Iron Town), where people work hard to survive, stands in contrast to the forest, showing the grey areas in these exchanges. Neither the gods nor the humans are depicted as purely good or evil, illustrating that nature should not be viewed as a mere resource for human exploitation, nor as something inherently superior to humanity (Palmer, 2021). Through these portrayals, the film underscores human behaviour's complexity and how simple solutions cannot resolve environmental issues. Miyazaki here further suggests that recognising the need to protect our forests is crucial to preventing the deterioration of our existence. Shifting our perspective to understand the necessity of preserving nature—not solely for its utility to us—is an essential step towards developing eco-consciousness (Miyazaki, 2014, pp. 32–37).

4. ***Spirited Away* (2001):** Incorporating spiritual elements from Shintoism and the concept of kami, *Spirited Away* unfolds within a contemporary Japanese landscape, blending

traditional and modern cultural frameworks. Miyazaki weaves Shinto folk beliefs into the protagonist Chihiro's journey, tying her emotional and psychological growth to the broader politics of nature (Clode & Wright, 2005). Through Chihiro's discovery of a mystical bathhouse for spirits, hidden adjacent to a modern city in a defunct amusement park accessed through a symbolic tunnel, Miyazaki subtly bridges ancient traditions with modern realities. The film also cleverly critiques consumerism and materialism, embedding environmental issues within the narrative under the guise of a comedic animation (Gartlan, 2024). As Chihiro navigates her way through this surreal world, her development parallels the broader theme of reconnecting with a natural world that has been overshadowed by urbanisation and material desires.

5. ***The Boy and the Heron* (2023):** In *The Boy and the Heron*, Miyazaki weaves a narrative that diverges from traditional linear storytelling, focusing on the emotional journey of Mahito, a young boy navigating through grief, loss, and trauma. The film builds an emotional structure that mirrors Mahito's internal world, challenging him to confront his internal conflicts as he embarks on a transformative journey of self-discovery and healing (Ting et al., 2024). With its central themes of life, death, and rebirth, the story illustrates the impossibility of creating a perfect world, highlighting the inevitability of both good and evil. This theory is reflected in the film's depiction of pelicans and monstrous parakeets, which embody the malice of the real world, representing war, destruction, and environmental harm. The pelicans, who prey on the *warawara* that represents unborn human souls, and the parakeets, who seek to manipulate Mahito's granduncle's pursuit of a utopian world free from malice, serve as metaphors for the ecological and moral challenges of existence. Through this lens, Miyazaki conveys his philosophy that while perfection is unattainable, a world that embraces the beauty of good and evil makes life meaningful (Harris, 2024).

To analyse the ecological themes embedded in the five selected films, this study will examine each in-depth, focusing on key characters, their behaviours, guiding principles, and pivotal scenes that foreground ecological issues. The eco-spirituality examined in this research aligns with Miyazaki's broader treatment of animism—a philosophy under which nature is portrayed as a living entity, often represented through kami or gods. This connection to the natural world, rooted in Shinto beliefs, reflects an intangible cultural heritage that places a deep emphasis on respecting and honouring nature (Yoneyama, 2021). However, Miyazaki's Shinto symbolism does not overtly project religious intent. Instead, it serves as a narrative device aimed at enchanting the audience

with the vitality and presence of nature. In Miyazaki's films, spirits are omnipresent, inhabiting trees, water, mountains, animals, and objects.

Additionally, various Shinto elements such as *torii* gates, camphor trees, *Dosojin* statues, *Jizo* statues, *shimenawa* (ropes representing the presence of kami), and *susuwatari* or soot sprites, play a significant role in depicting the spiritual dimension within Miyazaki's narratives (Gartlan, 2024). These symbols, while not overtly religious, serve as narrative vehicles that guide the characters as they go through personal growth, healing, and transformation. The interaction between these spiritual symbols and the characters reinforces the philosophical notion of eco-spirituality, echoing Ryotaro Shiba's idea of showing courtesy towards nature. By doing so, Miyazaki's works emphasise a profound respect for the natural world, making a case for rethinking humanity's relationship with nature through a spiritual and ecological lens.

This study argues that Miyazaki's works are vital cultural artefacts that bridge ecological, spiritual, and cultural discourses. They offer a compelling call to action to rethink our place in the natural world.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Originating from Japan, anime (Japanese animation) and manga (Japanese-style comics or graphic novels) have become pivotal cultural forms, reflecting significant aspects of Japanese cultural change. By the 1960s, in response to the stresses of rapid modernisation, manga emerged as a popular medium for both children and adults, offering entertainment and a form of stress relief (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 97). Anime, with its diverse genres ranging from hard-edged science fiction to philosophically driven narratives, appeals broadly across age groups.

Hayao Miyazaki, a renowned Japanese animated filmmaker, has created a series of films to inspire heartfelt enjoyment, that is largely aimed at children, through their storytelling and visually stunning worlds (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 91). His films are underpinned by complex and nuanced ecological themes, also highlighting societal issues of today's world. His works often explore humanity's relationship with nature, embedding eco-philosophies within his intricate narratives. The majority of his films engage with a spectrum of global and social issues, making them valuable not only as entertainment but also as subjects for scholarly exploration of contemporary ecological challenges.

Miyazaki's films are particularly significant in their ability to transcend cultural and generational boundaries, as evidenced by their widespread global appeal. The broad appeal of his stories, while deeply rooted in Japanese traditions such as Shintoism and Buddhism, appears in part due to his unique ability to blend of local and global perspectives on environmental issues (Clode & Wright, 2005). Analysing the ecological themes in Miyazaki's films reveals how they convey the interconnectedness of humans and nature, underscoring the importance of eco-literacy and environmental consciousness. These themes are particularly impactful for young audiences, as they have the potential to shape attitudes and behaviours toward nature, and our relationship to it, from an early age. By fostering a deeper understanding of the human-nature relationship, Miyazaki's work encourages viewers to reflect on their environmental responsibilities and the systemic issues at the root of today's converging environmental crises.

The significance of this study extends beyond thematic analysis; it has the potential to reflect on how we understand and address the pressing environmental issues of our time. By exploring the rich, layered narratives of Miyazaki's films, the study seeks to inspire a deeper appreciation for

the environment and promote a more harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, albeit that, as Miyazaki acknowledges, this is seldom straightforward.

2.1 Hayao Miyazaki's Early Days and Cultural Influence

Hayao Miyazaki was born on January 5th, 1941, during the turbulent years of World War II. One of his earliest memories involves evacuating his home with his family at the age of four (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 435). His father and uncle operated the Miyazaki Airplane Corporation, which provided some security during the war as they produced fan belts for warplanes. However, the postwar period brought significant challenges, and the family's wealth diminished. Additionally, his mother suffered from tuberculosis and was bedridden, leaving Miyazaki and his brothers to manage the household, as their father was largely absent. In 1958, during his final year of high school, Miyazaki decided to pursue a career in drawing, aspiring to become a manga artist. His work as an established animator would later reflect these personal experiences, including the firebombing of his house during World War II, the post-war conditions, growing up in the Shōwa Era with his troubled family, and his interest in European and American literature (Palmer, 2021).

Miyazaki's journey to becoming an animator began during his challenging high school years while he was preparing for university entrance exams. At the time, he was drawn to *gekiga*, a dramatic style of comic book art aimed at older audiences. *Gekiga* was often drawn by artists who experienced personal hardships and themes of resentment and spite characterised the stories. Miyazaki found the cynical endings of these stories refreshing as they served as a way for him to cope with his own anxiety (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 49). In 1958, during his final year of high school, he watched Japan's first full-length colour animated film, *Hakujaden (The Tale of the White Serpent,* 1958*)*. This film was a cultural revelation for him, leading him to abandon *gekiga*. Reflecting on his earlier work, which was influenced by his troubled childhood and youth, Miyazaki realised that it might be more meaningful to express what is genuinely good, beautiful, and true, as he describes, "It might be better to express in an honest way that what is good is good, what is pretty is pretty, and what is beautiful is beautiful" (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 50). As Miyazaki matured into a young adult, he realised the importance of forming his own perspectives and developing independent thoughts, rather than simply adhering to the views of others without self-reflection. This shift in mindset led him to move away from creating nihilistic *gekiga* and toward drawing manga that could depict the honesty and innocence of children. With the aim to send a message of cheer to those wandering aimlessly, this transition marked the beginning of Hayao Miyazaki's career as an animator (Miyazaki, 2009, pp. 50–52).

In 1963, after graduating from Gakushuin University, Miyazaki joined Toei Animation where he met Isao Takahata, who would become a lifelong friend and collaborator in the animation industry. As active union members, Miyazaki and Takahata found Toei Animation to be overly restrictive (Cavallaro, 2015, pp. 30–31). For Miyazaki, the challenges of difficult productions and proposals led to a loss of enthusiasm for manga artistry. That is when he came across *Snedronningen* (*The Snow Queen,* 1970)*,* the Danish film directed by Jørgen Vestergaard, that rekindled his passion and solidified his determination to continue working as an animator at a time of self-doubt (Miyazaki, 2009, pp. 70–71). In 1971, Miyazaki moved to A-Pro Studios along with Takahata where they worked for two years before moving to Nippon Animation. Miyazaki directed his first TV series, *Mirai Shōnen Konan (Conan, The Boy in Future)*, in 1978. He subsequently transitioned to Toho Studios in 1979, where he directed his first feature film, *Rupan Sansei Kariosutoro no Shiro* (*Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro).* After being engaged in the production of various manga in a variety of production houses, the turning point of his career took place in 1984, when he released *Kaze no Tani no Naushika* (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind).* Distributed by Toei Animation, *Nausicaä* achieved unprecedented success and is considered a seminal influence in the development of anime (Chute, 1998).

The success of *Nausicaä* played a pivotal role in motivating Miyazaki, Takahata, Toshio Suzuki, and Yasuyoshi Tokuma to establish Studio Ghibli in Tokyo in 1985 for their next project. With the aim of making films that entertain and bring joy to children, the studio proceeded to release some of the most famous animated films of all time. Following the release of *Tenkū no Shiro Rapyuta (Laputa: Castle in the Sky)* in 1986, which attracted approximately 775,000 viewers to the cinemas, *Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro),* directed by Miyazaki, and *Hotaru no Haka (Grave of the Fireflies),* directed by Takahata, were released together in 1988. These films cemented Studio Ghibli's reputation for exceptional cinematographic quality. Soon after, in 1989, Miyazaki released *Majo no Takkyūbin (Kiki's Delivery Service)* gaining a 'Disney-like mega success' drawing approximately 2.64 million viewers to the cinemas (Cavallaro, 2015, pp. 40–41).

Integrating the challenges facing humanity with enduring ecological themes became Miyazaki's creative signature over the years, distinguishing his unique style, thematic depth, and world-building in the anime industry. After extensive work beginning in 1980, *Mononoke-Hime (Princess Mononoke)* was released in 1997, with a record-breaking production cost of $19.6 million. The film's monumental success made it the highest-grossing movie in Japan in 1997, maintaining its premiere position in Japan's box office until 2001*,* when it was surpassed by another Miyazaki

masterpiece, *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi (Spirited Away)*. *Princess Mononoke* grossed over $150 million in Japan, its popularity stemming from the intricate portrayal of Japanese folklore and mythology. Although initially aimed at young audiences, the film explores complex existential themes, intertwining supernatural and ecological narratives with human relationships. Its explicit depiction of violence arguably positioned it more as an adult film (Cavallaro, 2015, pp. 120–121) than previous works.

Miyazaki's works have always been motivated by his desire to inspire children. His unique narratives of environmentalism, pacifism, technology, the empowerment of children and women, love and hatred, Japanese history, and anti-war sentiments led to the creation of the term 'Miyazaki world' by Susan Napier (Palmer, 2021). Films such as *Kaze no Tani no Naushika (Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind), Mononoke-Hime (Princess Mononoke), Kaze Tachinu (The Wind Rises),* and *Kurenai no Buta (Porco Rosso)* prominently feature anti-war themes where the protagonists often strive to end conflicts, embodying his pacifistic ideals. Similarly, his feminist perspective is evident in his portrayal of strong female protagonists who defy traditional gender roles. These characters are not confined to the domestic sphere but are leaders, warriors, and agents of change. They are portrayed as fierce, independent, and principled, often engaging in battles to protect their beliefs and communities. For instance, in *Princess Mononoke,* San, one of the key characters, is shown as a fearless warrior fighting to protect the forest and in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, Nausicaä is depicted as a compassionate and courageous leader dedicated to preserving her war-torn world (Rifa-Valls, 2011). Aimed at younger audiences, films like *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away* feature characters who embody kindness, love, and bravery. Characters like Satsuki and Mei in *Totoro* and Chihiro in *Spirited Away* demonstrate a deep spiritual connection to nature and all living things (Ma & Cheng, 2016).

One significant influence on Miyazaki in the post-war Japanese landscape was his encounter with Sasuke Nakao's book *Cultivated Plants and the Origins of Agriculture* in the 1970s. Nakao's hypothesis of the 'Culture of Evergreen Oak Forest' profoundly impacted Miyazaki, leading him to appreciate the value of culture in nature and the co-existence of all living beings. This perspective shifted his thinking, directing his focus toward the intricate world of plants and animals, which he began to use as symbols of complexity (Mayumi et al., 2005). This encounter catalysed the development of an environmental theme deeply rooted in the Japanese landscape, where Miyazaki's films often blend the natural world with human existence, portraying nature not merely as a physical environment but as a living entity. By intertwining the natural and human

worlds, Miyazaki creates narratives that emphasise the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of all life forms.

He frequently depicts the complexity of the natural world through animistic beliefs that reflect a spiritual perspective (Palmer, 2021). Animism, as observed by Mumcu and Yilmaz (2018), merges elements of Shintoist and Buddhist beliefs in divine spirits, or kami, residing in all living beings. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is widely regarded as a seminal work in the ecological movement. However, beyond its environmental themes, the film integrates Shinto concepts, emphasising that respect for all beings is crucial to maintaining the equilibrium of all living things (Clode & Wright, 2005). In *Nausicaä,* the destruction of the natural environment disrupts this equilibrium, while *Spirited Away* portrays how urbanisation alienates humans from nature, leading to mutual destruction. By incorporating Shinto beliefs, Miyazaki advocates for co-existing with nature, underscoring the importance of being courteous and showing civility to air, water, and mountains as proposed by Ryotaro Shiba (1923–1996) (Palmer, 2021). Through eco-consciousness and eco-spirituality, Miyazaki argues we can strengthen the bond between humans and nature, fostering harmonious coexistence.

Over the years, Miyazaki's work has consistently conveyed a distinctive sense of hope, albeit with a recognition of the contradictions and challenges involved in maintaining a balance between human and environmental concerns. Drawing inspiration from a cultural perspective through Nakao's hypothesis, he emphasises the importance of recognising humanity's impact on nature (Palmer, 2021) to maintain an ecological balance. While his films may not offer definitive solutions to environmental issues, which remain ongoing struggles, they convey a hopeful vision for the future by affirming the importance of a harmonious human-nature relationship. In doing so, Miyazaki's ecological philosophy is deeply rooted in Japanese cultural representation and animistic beliefs, presenting a worldview distinct from Western thought.

2.2 Ecological Themes Addressed in Miyazaki's Films

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, My Neighbor Totoro, and *Princess Mononoke* exemplify Miyazaki's exploration of ecological themes, where characters are inherently connected to plants, animals, and water, conveying to the audience that the world's problems extend beyond human conflicts. His ecophilosophy is rooted in this connection, promoting an attitude of equality among all living beings. However, Miyazaki is careful to indicate that there is no simple solution to environmental challenges. The ecological issues we face today stem from human actions,

perhaps initially well-intentioned, but ultimately flawed. The inextricable relationship between nature and humanity has faced repeated breakdowns on a global scale (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 28). Simply advocating slogans like ‘We shouldn't cut down trees’ or ‘We must cherish nature’ falls short; such approaches are mere advertising—empty rhetoric lacking substantial action, which Miyazaki has found deeply troubling. He has expressed, at times, a desire for a post-human and post-technological world, where nature reclaims the Earth, leading to the extinction of humankind, driven by our greed for money and power (Gossin, 2015). Although his perspective may seem cynical, Miyazaki understands the consequences of failing to appreciate the interdependence within the natural system not only for humans but for all life on earth.

Miyazaki explores the interdependence and interconnectedness between humans and nature in various patterns throughout his films. While human characters often occupy the central narrative, nature and man-made environments are depicted in both harmony and conflict until a balance of mutual respect is achieved. His films serve as an ode to nature, fostering eco-consciousness in his audience by illustrating humanity’s role in relation to the natural world. Through diverse landscapes, he educates his young viewers on the complexity of environmental conflicts, including environmental degradation, over-consumption, ecological economics, and the repercussions of human actions. Many of his films feature recurring motifs such as nature as a spiritual entity rooted in Shinto beliefs, the human-nature relationship, deities as guardians of the environment, the exploitation of the natural world, and the wrath of nature in response to such exploitation (Mumcu & Yilmaz, 2018).

Eco-philosophy has evolved into multiple strands over time, including Deep Ecology, Social Ecology, Eco-Feminism, and Green Taoism, among others. Despite their theoretical differences, these perspectives share a common commitment to the preservation and flourishing of the planet and all its life forms (Skolimowski, 1990). At the 1991 Nairobi World Conference on Philosophy, a recurrent theme among the speakers was the notion of a primordial era in which humans coexisted harmoniously with nature. Notably, key speakers Professors Wiredu and Agazzi underscored the urgent need for a fundamental shift in humanity’s attitude toward the natural world, advocating for a return to values akin to African communalism, which emphasises moral responsibility and interconnectedness between humans and the environment (Oruka, 1996). These ethical underpinnings are clearly reflected in the ecological worldview presented throughout Miyazaki’s cinematic works.

One of the earliest expressions of Miyazaki's eco-philosophy is evident in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. Set in a dystopian future where the world is ravaged by conflict and environmental devastation, the film presents an apocalyptic narrative in which human greed and thirst for power have disrupted the balance of nature (Bartolomei et al., 2023). This disruption is portrayed as a form of retribution, with nature exacting revenge on humanity for its transgressions. The inspiration for *Nausicaä* was partly drawn from the real-life environmental disaster in Minamata Bay, where mercury pollution poisoned the fish, forcing them to adapt to an inhospitable environment. This resilience of Minamata Bay's fish mirrors the fictional flora in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind,* symbolising nature's remarkable ability to adapt and persist despite human-induced harm (Pallant, 2015). The core lesson imparted is that pollution arises when humans disrupt natural order by positioning themselves apart from it. When humans begin to acknowledge and understand the repercussions of their actions, nature has the capacity to restore balance and harmony. This is exemplified when Nausicaä learns that the *fukai* (the Sea of Decay or the Toxic Jungle), initially perceived as malevolent, is not inherently evil but part of a complex natural system striving to correct the imbalance (Clode & Wright, 2005).

On a similar note, *My Neighbor Totoro* portrays an idyll in which humans embrace their role as part of nature and live in harmony without disrupting the natural cycle. Set against the backdrop of the traditional Japanese rural landscape, the film draws inspiration from the agricultural countryside of Sayama Hills in west Tokyo (Mumcu & Yilmaz, 2018). Miyazaki's deep affection for nature is embodied in Totoro, the giant forest spirit, who serves as a bridge between the realms of nature and childhood. Through Totoro, Miyazaki expresses his philosophy of connecting with nature, with the hope that the film will inspire children to explore forests and foster a love for the natural world.

Miyazaki made *Nausicaä* and *Totoro* with the intent of fostering eco-consciousness and environmental awareness among his young audience (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 27). However, he was dissatisfied with the conclusion of *Nausicaä,* particularly its overly optimistic resolution to the complex conflict between humans and the natural environment. The theme of the human-nature relationship has always been a recurring motif in Miyazaki's work. With *Nausicaä's* thematic sequel, *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki addressed his dissatisfaction by attempting to capture a more nuanced representation of human/nature duality, where the possibility of a definitive resolution is contested (Cavallaro, 2015, p. 52). Set in the Muromachi period (1338-1573) against a backdrop of political and cultural instability, Miyazaki explores the central ethical dilemma surrounding the inherent ambiguity of the human-nature relationship. Reflecting on real-life ethical

challenges Miyazaki asserts that “there can be no happy ending to the war between the rampaging forest gods and humanity,” yet he also insists that “even amidst hatred and slaughter, there is still much to live for” and that “wonderful encounters and beautiful things still exist” (Shore, 2013). The key characters, San, the wolf girl, and Lady Eboshi, the leader of Tataraba *(*Iron Town), are guided by their respective motivations to protect their land. Miyazaki intentionally portrays the characters as complex figures, emphasising that their ultimate nature is neither purely good nor entirely evil (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 30). Through this exploration of the intricate human-nature relationship, Miyazaki subtly suggests that eco-spiritual connections have the power to heal both humanity and the nature of the metaphorical pollution caused by hatred and violence.

In *Spirited Away,* Miyazaki’s Academy Award-winning film, the director continues his exploration of the complex world we inhabit by integrating Shinto into a modern context. Rather than simplifying the narrative for children, Miyazaki addresses contemporary issues such as consumerism, materialism, environmental degradation, and societal fragmentation. These themes align with his leftist beliefs and the idea of empowerment through labour, as depicted by the diligent workers in the bathhouse and the protagonist, Chihiro, who learns the values of responsibility and purpose (Martínez & Mateu, 2022). The film’s environmental message, which resonates with real-world concerns, becomes particularly evident when Chihiro encounters the Stink Spirit — a figure burdened with garbage and waste. After she cleanses it, the spirit reveals itself as a noble River Spirit. Miyazaki drew inspiration for this sequence from his experience with environmental damage in the countryside where he lives. He observed a river being cleaned, where a bicycle, stuck above the surface and weighed down by years of accumulated dirt and debris, was removed. As the river was cleansed, life returned to it, evidenced by the reappearance of fish (Clode & Wright, 2005). Through these carefully crafted scenes, Miyazaki subtly connects his narrative to environmental politics, encouraging his audience to confront the consequences of pollution.

After a decade-long hiatus following the release of *The Wind Rises* (2013), Hayao Miyazaki returned in 2023 with another Academy Award-winning film, *Kimitachi wa Dō Ikiru ka (The Boy and The Heron)*. According to Studio Ghibli co-founder and producer Toshio Suzuki, this is Miyazaki’s most personal film, infused with autobiographical elements. The protagonist, Mahito, is a reflection of Miyazaki himself, drawing inspiration from his childhood. The other two key characters, the heron and the granduncle are inspired by his career at Ghibli and his close friends, Isao Takahata and Suzuki (Desowitz, 2023). Beyond its autobiographical elements, the film explores themes of life, death, and rebirth, interwoven with the complex conflict between humans

and nature. It suggests that no one will come to save us and that after the world crumbles and civilisation burns, the green grasses will eventually inherit the earth. Through this journey, the protagonist learns that change occurs gradually, one block at a time. The film conveys that there is no perfect world, only a balance between good and evil. While no single person can eradicate malice, hatred, and greed, they can contribute to goodness and love, collectively influencing the fate of life on this planet for the better.

2.3 Contrast of Culture and Nature Ethics

Just as Miyazaki's characters evolve through their experiences and surroundings, our world is similarly divided by differing perspectives on life, nature, and our interactions with other beings. Miyazaki references a newspaper column he once read to illustrate the contrast between Japanese and European views on life and death (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 146). In Japan, it is said that as individuals age, they often desire to become one with nature, embracing a harmonious relationship with the environment. This perspective aligns with many cultures influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and other indigenous and traditional beliefs. However, by contrast, the European and Western worldview is often predicated on confronting and dominating nature. Similarly, Mumcu and Yilmaz (2018) expand on the Western worldview that originates predominantly in the scientific revolution and the corresponding rise of capitalism—both of which positioned nature as a resource for human exploitation, and positioned humanity as separate from and superior to the natural world. Such a worldview inevitably leads to ecological crises and natural disasters. Conversely, the Japanese human-nature relationship has historically been inseparable, with cultural traditions deeply intertwined with nature.

Culture plays a crucial role in shaping how we perceive and interact with the natural world. In ancient times, Shintoism, one of the world's oldest religions, instilled a deep respect for nature, teaching humans to live in harmony with the environment (Victoria, 2018). However, with the advent of rapid modernisation, even well-intentioned actions aimed at benefiting both humans and nature can have unintended, complex consequences. Miyazaki highlights an example where windbreak forests planted by the ancestors of Hokkaido were cut down to accommodate mechanised agricultural equipment. This land, which had thrived in natural stability during the Edo period (1603-1868), began to degrade steadily with Japan's modernisation during the Meiji period (1868-1912) (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 144).

Cultural and historical elements have significantly influenced Miyazaki's approach to many of his films. A notable example is *Princess Mononoke*, set against the backdrop of Japan's Muromachi

period (1338-1573), a time marked by social upheaval, eccentricity, and fluidity. Unlike conventional period dramas that often feature samurai and peasants, Miyazaki's narrative focuses on the conflict between the spirits of nature and the forces of industrialisation. His fascination with the historical relationship between humanity and nature, particularly the role of ironworks in Japanese history, fuelled his imagination to deviate from such typical medieval settings. By choosing this era of transition from the medieval to the pre-modern period, Miyazaki explores the period when the evergreen broadleaf forests began to vanish, reflecting the broader environmental and societal shifts of the time (Miyazaki, 2014, pp. 16, 60).

Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* is set contemporaneously in the early 2000s but draws from historical influences, particularly Japan's Meiji period (1868-1912), a time when modernisation and Western influence rapidly transformed the country into a capitalist society. The film serves as a critique of Japan's history of capitalism while also addressing issues of the post-modern era. During the Meiji period, often hailed as a time of restoration, industrialisation introduced Western culture into various aspects of Japanese life, including philosophy, architecture, fashion, and values. Miyazaki uses the narrative to denounce the capitalist mindset that diminishes spiritual values, skillfully weaving social commentary into the fabric of a mystical story (Suzuki, 2009b).

Miyazaki's films often reflect the consequences of capitalism and globalisation on the natural world, serving as a critique of the modern lifestyle's impact on the environment. Though Marxist theories initially influenced Miyazaki during his early union activities, he later distanced himself from these ideas, developing a strong aversion to Marxism in the 1990s due to its focus on class distinctions (Cavallaro, 2015, p. 33). Despite this ideological shift, his leftist beliefs never really took a back seat as he continued to address the dilemmas of human society in relation to their ecological consequences (Dobry, n.d.). Miyazaki's environmental ethic is a synthesis of various influences, creating aesthetically pleasing works that connect cultural and historical elements with nature. One notable parallel can be drawn with the environmental philosophy of Roderick Frazier Nash, a prominent environmental scholar and advocate. Gossin (2015) argues that Miyazaki's environmental views align with Nash's wilderness ethic, which emphasises the right of wild ecosystems to exist independently of human-derived value or utility. Furthermore, Gossin notes that Miyazaki's works acknowledge all seven of Nash's values: scientific, spiritual, aesthetic, heritage, psychological, cultural, and intrinsic worth of wild ecosystems.

Miyazaki's portrayal of nature is deeply intertwined with the spiritual value of the environment, a concept that aligns with Nash's wilderness ethics. However, his depiction of gods and natural

spirits is not intended to impose a spiritual narrative on young audiences. Just as Miyazaki is a bundle of contradictions, his storytelling carries his plethora of obsessions (Gossin, 2015). The spiritual value attributed to nature in his works acts as a carrier to the idea that humanity is an integral part of nature and should not exploit it for selfish gain. Drawing from Ryotaro Shiba's notion that 'civility' is crucial in addressing societal problems, Miyazaki extends this principle to the human-nature relationship. While nature sustains life, the true rupture between the relationship occurs when conservation efforts are motivated solely by human benefit; such actions reduce us to mere exploiters. To truly understand and preserve nature, Miyazaki suggests that we must unlearn ingrained attitudes and view nature in its raw form—savage and indifferent to civilisation. Achieving equilibrium with the environment, therefore, requires us to approach ecological issues with civility, extending respect not just to living beings, but to the water, air, and mountains as well (Miyazaki, 2009, pp. 213–214).

2.4 Application of Ecological Themes

Over the years, numerous scholars have examined Miyazaki's films through the lens of environmental ecology, recognising how his work fosters an emotional connection between viewers and the natural world. In one of the earliest academic analyses of Miyazaki's films, Chute (1998) emphasised that the filmmaker cannot create a movie without addressing humanity's role within the ecosystem, effectively positioning his work as a distinct subgenre. Nature is a central theme in his films, consistently infused with his unique eco-philosophy. Likewise, Mayumi, Solomon, and Chang (2005) argue that Miyazaki can be considered an ecological economist, as he acknowledges and communicates the intricate connections between environmental issues and the political economy of the environment. In modern society, development often comes at the expense of nature. While we cannot outright condemn development or industrialisation, the challenge remains: how can we achieve a balance between human progress and nature? Throughout history, no nation or culture has been consistently environmentally friendly. However, there have been periods and efforts aimed at sustainability, such as Edo Japan's attempts to create a waste-free city through the implementation of circular economy laws, where almost everything was reused, repaired, repurposed, and recycled in preindustrial Japan (Krznaric, 2024).

Despite these efforts, humans continue to be selfish and destructive toward nature. As depicted in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Princess Mononoke,* conflicts between humans and nature will often result in devastation and loss for both sides, and nature will lash back with

vengeance and fury. Clode and Wright (2005) explored the layers of pre-modern expressions of Shintoism, or the 'Way of Kami,' which Miyazaki incorporates into his narratives to depict environmental destruction metaphorically through both local and global perspectives. Gossin (2015) further examined Miyazaki's eco-philosophy by showcasing the undeniable human-nature relationship through subtle imagery and symbolism. His films often include teaching moments in which seemingly minor elements—such as the giant camphor tree in *My Neighbor Totoro*—symbolise protection, wisdom, and shelter, embodying deeper environmental messages. Collectively, these studies emphasise the fundamental importance of the human-nature relationship and demonstrate how cultural representations shape our understanding of ecological landscapes.

Hayao Miyazaki's films are not crafted to provide direct answers or solutions to the environmental challenges we face but rather to offer a lens through which we can better understand and critically reflect on these issues and the consequences of our actions on the natural world. Addressing complex challenges like climate change does not come with simple answers regarding blame or solutions. The distinction between good and evil often depends on the intentions behind actions, making it difficult to determine what is truly right or wrong. Just as the characters in *Princess Mononoke* cannot be easily categorised as good or evil—each acting according to their own beliefs—human behaviour is marked by contradictions and moral ambiguity (Palmer, 2021). Thus, as tools to guide us for ecological balance between humans and nature, Miyazaki's films aim to foster a deeper eco-consciousness in the audience. They show how human traits such as selfishness, hatred, and greed can lead to widespread destruction, while also illustrating that reconnecting with nature has the power to heal humanity, offering a sense of hope for a more harmonious future. Nature, in Miyazaki's view, is inherently regenerative, possessing the ability to endure and flourish even in the face of human wrongdoing. However, it is important to recognise that nature cannot continue to blossom if humanity persists in its destructive behaviours. We must learn from nature's regenerative processes, embrace the challenges that come with growth and change, and strive to follow a path that, although difficult, leads to a more sustainable and balanced relationship with the environment (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 86).

While Miyazaki's films arguably become increasingly less didactic and more concerned with the nuance and contradictions of the human-nature relationship, they nonetheless suggest that we must learn this crucial lesson. His oeuvre provides an excellent medium to convey it, and the environmental ethos evident throughout his works reflects an earnest concern for ecological issues and underscores the intrinsic connection between humanity and the natural world. The

deterioration of nature, as portrayed in his films, suggests that such decline will inevitably lead to the collapse of civilisation as we know it. His works clearly depict the destructive impact of human activities, not only emphasising the need to respect nature but also stressing the importance of holding ourselves, as a species, accountable for our ongoing actions.

While a growing body of scholarship has explored the ecological dimensions of Miyazaki's films, there remains insufficient attention to how his environmental ethos might resonate with or contribute to contemporary environmental discourse. Moreover, although anime has been acknowledged as a vehicle for ecological storytelling, there remains limited exploration of how such narratives intersect with real-world environmental challenges, particularly in the realm of environmental communication. This thesis addresses these gaps by examining Miyazaki's ecological imagination not only as artistic expression but as a reflective framework that reimagines humanity's relationship with nature and prompts deeper engagement with present-day environmental concerns.

Issues such as deforestation, pollution, and industrialisation are not presented merely for entertainment but are central to the narrative, serving as powerful reminders of the urgent need to address these challenges. Human actions have inflicted damage on nature for centuries, leading to today's devastating consequences, including floods, forest fires, mudslides, earthquakes, reduced snow cover, rising sea levels, and other extreme weather conditions. Since the pre-industrial era (1850-1900), the Earth has witnessed an average temperature increase of 1.36°C, a rate of change significantly faster than the long-term average (Change, 2023).

If emissions of greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide, fossil fuel combustion, and deforestation continue at the same rapid pace, the 2017 U.S. Climate Science Special Report estimates that the planet could be warmer by 2.78°C than the early 20th-century levels, with the potential to reach a 5.67°C (gov., 2024). Addressing this crisis requires more than individual efforts; it demands systemic change and genuine commitments. However, it is imperative that humanity demonstrates civility towards nature. Miyazaki's works transcend the realm of fiction, offering critical lessons that highlight the urgent need for environmental awareness. He effectively argues that collective effort is essential to achieve meaningful change (Wunsh, 2024). As the world grapples with the challenges of climate change, the future's fate depends on our collective actions to enact real and sustainable changes. This thesis seeks to highlight the urgent need to reconnect with nature to restore environmental equilibrium.

CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF STUDY

The body of this thesis consists of an examination of a selection of Hayao Miyazaki's films, which are renowned for their intricate exploration of complex environmental conflicts, humanity's relationship towards the environment, courtesy towards nature, and the consequences of human actions. These aspects are fundamental to Miyazaki's eco-philosophy and are central to his most iconic works, including *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2001), and his latest Academy Award-winning film, *The Boy and the Heron* (2023). The literature review section of this study examined the life and creative works of Hayao Miyazaki to trace the origins of his ecological philosophy. Through an exploration of key aspects of his personal history—such as his childhood, entry into the manga and anime industry, and the diverse influences that shaped his worldview—a clearer understanding emerged regarding the motivations behind his eco-conscious storytelling. This section of the study develops a flexible form of thematic analysis of Miyazaki's ecological ethos, focusing on his ongoing commentary on the importance of ecological balance and the interdependence between humans and nature. Through an adaptive approach to thematic analysis, five of his films will be examined to uncover the underlying environmental themes and to interpret the director's philosophy of what may be termed eco-consciousness and the human role in maintaining ecological equilibrium.

Given that Miyazaki's films' ecological ethos cannot be quantified, a qualitative research method is the only appropriate choice for interpreting the underlying concepts and narrative expression. There is no single, universally accepted approach to interpreting films, or to film criticism. Beyond technical measures, such interpretation tends to cohere around particular focalisations such as genre criticism, auteur criticism, feminist criticism, psychological criticism, and so forth, and it often combines or shifts between them. My research entails an analysis of ecological themes and as such dovetails into the wider movement of ecological or eco-criticism. However, eco-criticism is more of a focus than a method. In developing a methodology, I have sought an approach that both informs and, to some extent, formalises my organic process. This involves conducting a series of close viewings, supplemented by engagement with existing scholarly analyses from multiple perspectives, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of the subject (Bhandari, 2020). This approach allows for flexibility in 'data collection'—in this context, close readings or interpretations developed from close viewing—in dialogue with prior studies that have addressed Miyazaki's environmental landscapes, ecological vision, themes of consumption, eco-spiritual

narratives, and human-nature relationships. To further structure this, I propose to loosely adapt elements of the methodology known as thematic analysis, although this methodology in the main is not to be confused with the practice of analysing themes in a generalist sense. Like other qualitative studies, this research is inherently subjective, which may limit its potential for replicability. Nonetheless, the interpretive nature of this method provides a valuable framework for exploring Miyazaki's themes in depth.

Thematic analysis is a widely used method for analysing qualitative data, often applied to identify and interpret patterns within datasets such as interviews, transcripts, videos, and texts (Aslam & Rana, 2022). This method allows researchers to explore data in order to identify recurring themes. Notably, thematic analysis is recognised for its simplicity, robustness, and theoretical flexibility, making it adaptable to a wide range of research types without being tied to any specific discipline (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are various approaches to conducting thematic analyses. The process typically follows a six-step approach: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing these themes, defining and naming them, and finally producing the report. This structured approach helps mitigate the risk of confirmation bias by encouraging a systematic and thorough examination of the data (Bhandari, 2020).

In its traditional form, thematic analysis identifies and organises patterns within data to generate insight. However, to analyse film themes, a less schematic and interpretive method is required. As such, a flexible adaptation of thematic analysis is employed in this study to accommodate the intricate cultural dimensions of Miyazaki's films. This flexibility allows for a deductive approach, enabling a close examination of latent meanings in Miyazaki's ecological and spiritual representations (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Although the conventional structure of thematic analysis may not seamlessly apply to cultural products such as film, this study adapts its framework to better suit the interpretive depth required for this medium. The following section outlines each phase of the adapted six-phase thematic analysis, clarifying its application to the film analysis. However, the chapters presenting my close viewing do not follow these stages rigidly; rather, they synthesise this approach to provide a cohesive interpretation.

1. **Familiarisation with the data:** This stage has involved thoroughly immersing myself in Miyazaki's films, watching and re-watching each to become deeply acquainted with the content. Through these repeated viewings, I have aimed to internalise the material to aid the careful selection of parts that resonate with my research question. This iterative

process also allowed me to take extensive notes on the films' meanings, identifying patterns in recurring themes and symbols that reflect Miyazaki's ecological vision.

2. **Generating initial codes:** Generating codes, as defined in thematic analysis, typically involves identifying features of the data pertinent to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A formal coding process might be appropriate for identifying the deployment of technical codes such as cinematography, camera angles, and lighting, which are essential for understanding the medium's structure. In examining eco-philosophical themes, however, such a formal coding approach would not suffice, given the complex, layered nature of a film's more symbolic codes (Ipurangi, n.d.). These symbolic codes necessitate interpretation that goes beyond the straightforward communication model of the sender-message-channel-receiver (SMCR model) developed by David Berlo (Turaga, 2016). Instead, the emotional and connotative layers that influence how we perceive a film's various expressions of ecological consciousness must be considered. In this context, 'codes' can be interpreted flexibly as the methods through which a film represents, signifies, alludes to, or embodies various key elements. For instance, in Miyazaki's works, traditional Japanese *torii* gates often symbolise the transition into an animistic world shaped by Shinto beliefs, serving as significant markers within the narrative. Therefore, I focus on the rich layered meanings that derive from dramaturgical and storytelling elements, including the characters, emotions, motivations, justifications, as well as relationships between humans and nature. This initial interpretative approach is informed by existing scholarship on Miyazaki's eco-philosophy.

3. **Identifying themes:** Themes can be understood as overarching, recurring patterns that organise the films' codes into larger systems of meaning. After multiple, detailed viewings, I sought to identify key themes that align closely with the research question, particularly those related to the human-nature relationship and what may tentatively be termed 'eco-spiritual' connections. These two central themes will serve as the foundation for the study's analysis of each film. Through interpretive analysis, it became apparent that these thematic elements distinguish Miyazaki's films from many conventional environmental narratives that present a clear distinction between good and evil, highlighting the unique elements of his approach to ecological storytelling. As noted by Clode and Wright (2005), Miyazaki's characters blend Japanese and foreign characteristics, building an accessible "modern myth" that resonates with an international audience. His work is deeply rooted in Shinto and related mythology, reflecting his commitment to revitalising traditional spiritual

principles in a contemporary cinematic form. However, this is by no means exclusionary, as his references extend beyond Japanese traditions to include influences such as European literature and folklore. This interplay of cultural elements shapes a distinct ecological ethos within his films, distinguishing them within the discourse of environmentalism and cultural representation.

4. **Reviewing the potential themes:** In this dynamic phase, each identified theme undergoes a secondary review to evaluate its relevance and reliability. Among the five films analysed, the prominence of environmental themes varies. While *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, My Neighbour Totoro,* and *Princess Mononoke* are constructed around clearly identified environmental landscapes, *Spirited Away* and *The Boy and the Heron* convey Miyazaki's ecological vision through otherworldly locales akin to low fantasy worlds. In examining these themes, this study adopts a deductive approach, aiming to interpret and explore such elements as shaping agents in the audience's understanding and engagement with Miyazaki's environmental stance.

5. **Defining and naming themes:** Following the identification of potential themes and thoroughly reviewing the codes, the next step involves analysing in a non-linear pattern how these codes build up to form the core themes of human-nature relationship and eco-spirituality, as well as their recurrence across the five films under analysis. By incorporating key insights highlighted in existing research, this study supports a more nuanced and subjective understanding of these themes and their significance in Miyazaki's work. In concrete terms, this phase corresponds to the concluding section of each of the five dedicated chapters of thematic analyses.

6. **Producing the report:** The final phase of conventional thematic analysis is the synthesis and production of a report, typically structured for academic publications such as journal articles or dissertations (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this study, this phase corresponds to the Findings section (Chapter 9), which will address the central research question—how Hayao Miyazaki's films underscore the need for ecological balance between humanity and the natural world, serving as cautionary reflections on contemporary environmental challenges. Each film represents an evolution in Miyazaki's environmental understanding. From *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* to his latest *The Boy and the Heron*, the study arguably reflects a distinct evolution in his ecological philosophy. This progression highlights his view that environmental deterioration is a persistent and escalating crisis.

Through a close examination of Miyazaki's environmental ethos, this study directly links the selected films to the identified themes, providing an integrated view of his ecological vision.

As the researcher of this study, my interest in analysing Hayao Miyazaki's work stems from a personal curiosity to understand the artistic and philosophical influences behind his films. My introduction to Miyazaki's world began with *Spirited Away*, where Chihiro's complex journey of emotional and intellectual growth drew me into his distinctive approach to character development and storytelling. This experience served as my gateway into the world of Studio Ghibli. Watching *Princess Mononoke* further deepened my interest, especially in how Miyazaki's films explore human connections to the environment and convey values of eco-spirituality.

While this study's analysis is grounded in the researcher's interpretive judgement, decisions, and subjective insights, it does not operate in isolation. Rather, the analysis is informed and structured by existing scholarly findings that have already recognised the environmental themes present in Miyazaki's films. Notably, Chute's (1998) seminal 1998 article laid the groundwork by exploring Miyazaki's dedication to portraying humanity's relationship with the environment, emphasising the director's use of hand-drawn animation to create fantastical worlds reflecting this connection. Building on this, Mayumi et al. (2005) positioned Miyazaki as an ecological economist, arguing that his films function as educational tools for addressing environmental concerns. Palmer (2021) further contributes to this discussion by highlighting how the disconnection between humans and nature leads to both spiritual decline and environmental degradation. By examining these foundational perspectives, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of how Miyazaki's films not only portray ecological themes but also underscore the importance of environmental responsibility, ecological balance, and the urgency of environmental stewardship.

Art is a powerful medium in its many forms, and anime and manga, with their wide-reaching audiences, serve as strong vehicles for cultural messages. Scholars Kawentar and Noor (2021) suggest that manga can serve as a valuable educational tool, as exemplified by *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, which conveys significant moral messages. Through their ability to evoke deep impressions and emotional engagement, Miyazaki's films provide a powerful medium for ecological education and reflection. Both scholars and audiences have widely acknowledged the ecological themes embedded in his films. As Mumcu and Yilmaz (2018) observe, the depiction of nature in Miyazaki's works often extends beyond mere scenery, instead embodying its own spirit—a concept deeply influenced by Shinto beliefs. This perspective represents an animistic

view of nature, where the environment is seen as a living force with spiritual significance—intangible yet profoundly impactful (Yoneyama, 2021).

While Miyazaki's films do not propose explicit solutions to contemporary environmental issues or advocate for environmentalism directly, they emphasise the critical importance of reconnecting with nature (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 109). This study explores how Miyazaki's films build a bridge between their narratives and present-day environmental crises, analysing the eco-conscious and eco-spiritual themes embedded in his storytelling. Through an analysis of these core themes in the selected films, the research will explore how Miyazaki's films advocate reverence, respect, and civility toward nature, urging humanity to adopt a more spiritually connected relationship with the natural world. Despite their seemingly subtle approach, these films do not shy away from existential questions, nor do they hesitate to highlight the destructive effects of greed, selfishness, and chaos on both humanity and the natural world. Miyazaki's cinematic opus arguably serves not just as a tool for understanding environmental degradation, but also as a call to action for individuals to actively engage in restoring balance in the human-nature relationship. This analysis will synthesise these ideas to illustrate how his work inspires a holistic approach to environmental ethics, blending cultural respect, spiritual awareness, and ecological responsibility.

Eco-philosophy can be understood as a dynamic intellectual and emotional reflection on environmental protection and the inherent connection between humans and nature. While the necessity to safeguard the environment is universally acknowledged, the real challenge lies in determining the most effective and sustainable methods for doing so (Hull, 2020). It can be argued that addressing environmental challenges requires a fundamental shift in human thinking. Efforts to combat biodiversity loss, overpopulation, and ecosystem destruction cannot yield immediate results; instead, they demand a reconfiguration of our understanding to recognise that humans are neither separate from nor superior to nature. This study proposes that Miyazaki's work serves as both a mirror of environmental issues and a call to reimagine humanity's role in the natural world, prompting us to consider the ordeals we are willing to endure for the sake of harmony with nature (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 171).

CHAPTER 4: Nausicaä as the Promised Hero (1984)

In 1980, Hayao Miyazaki began working on the manga *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (Kaze no Tani no Naushika,* 1984*)* after being approached by the Japanese magazine Animage (Hereon, the film will also be addressed in the short term as *Nausicaä*). At a time when science fiction robots and experimental productions dominated Japanese animation with a focus on violence, *Nausicaä* offered a distinctive perspective with its post-apocalyptic narrative with environmentalist undertones (Chute, 1998). The manga version, which was serialised from February 1982 to March 1994, achieved significant acclaim over the decade it took to complete its seven volumes. Its critical successes included winning the 23rd Japan Cartoonists Association Award Grand Prize in 1994 and the 26th Seiun Award for Best Comic in 1995 (Greenberg, 2018).

The feature-length film adaptation was released in 1984 and is often regarded as a foundational work for Studio Ghibli. However, it was produced by Topcraft Animation Studios and distributed by Toei Company, marking an important milestone in Miyazaki's career and setting the stage for the studio's future successes. The film adaptation mirrors the early narrative arc of the manga, focusing exclusively on the first two volumes. Set in a desolate, post-apocalyptic world shaped by the aftermath of the cataclysmic Seven Days of Fire, a war that took place a millennium earlier, the film presents a truncated version of the broader story. It introduces the primary characters and establishes the central conflict involving the Valley of the Wind, Tolmekia, and Pejite, effectively laying the groundwork for the more expansive narrative developed in the manga. The world set here is one in which war has left Earth desolate and polluted, with the ecosystem severely damaged due to humanity's disregard for nature. By consequence, nature has claimed dominance, with much of the world consumed by the *Fukai* (Sea of Decay)—a toxic jungle teeming with poisonous gases, rotting wood, noxious fungi, and enormous plants and creatures. The *fukai* spreads relentlessly, rendering all it touches lethally toxic through airborne spores, posing a deadly threat to all living beings (Greenberg, 2018).

Miyazaki's portrayal of this desolate wasteland draws inspiration from the Minamata Bay mercury poisoning disaster of the 1950s and 1960s, one of the first globally publicised environmental disasters. This real-life tragedy highlighted the devastating biological transformations inflicted on ecosystems by human activity, an issue that resonated deeply with Miyazaki, leaving a lasting impression on his ecological vision (Palmer, 2021). It is also impossible to ignore the shared spectre of atomic devastation that hangs over many Shōwa era Japanese films following the bombing of Nakasaki and Hiroshima in 1945, from *Godzilla* (1954) to *Akira* (1988). Additionally,

the film reflects the broader environmental consequences of Japan's post-war industrialisation during the 1950s and 1960s. This era, marked by economic expansion and modern technological advancements, led to widespread industrial pollution, environmental degradation, and public health crises. Factors such as lack of social responsibility, systemic collusion between the government and corporations, and large-scale land reclamation projects exacerbated the problem (Karan, 2010). These historical and socio-economic realities are woven into *Nausicaä* through distinct symbolic codes, as notably found in the tension between animism, the greed for political power, and destructive technology, which reflect the consequences of human negligence toward nature.

The creation of the dystopian landscape in *Nausicaä* drew inspiration from various sources, including notable science fiction works such as Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) (Greenberg, 2018, p. 91) and other fantasy narratives, as discussed in the methodology chapter. Additional influences included René Laloux's animated film *Fantastic Planet* (1973), Jean Giraud Moebius *Arzach* (1975), and Sasuke Nakao's *East Asian Evergreen Forest Culture Theory,* which linked the *fukai* with humanity, subtly alluding to the post-war Japanese environment (Greenberg, 2018, p. 96). These diverse sources provided Miyazaki with a foundation for constructing the intricate and symbolic world of *Nausicaä*.

The eponymous character of Nausicaä is partially inspired by the Japanese folktale *Mushi-mezuru Himegimi* (*The Lady Who Loved Insects*), which tells the story of a woman who defies the rigid norms of Heian court society. Much like Nausicaä, the protagonist of the tale exhibits a profound connection to all living creatures. As an unconventional noblewoman, she prioritised studying insects over conforming to societal expectations such as wearing elegant attire, shaving her eyebrows, or pursuing marriage (McCarthy, 1999). Her name, however, is inspired by the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa from Homer's *Odýsseia* (*Odyssey)*. Miyazaki first encountered this 8th-century BC ancient Greek poem character while reading the Japanese translation of Bernard Evslin's *Gods, Demigods & Demons: Encyclopedia of Greek Mythology* (1975), and he was captivated by her qualities (Greenberg, 2018, p. 84). Although Miyazaki's Nausicaä is an original creation and not a carbon copy of the character from the *Odyssey*, she shares traits such as her hospitality, respect for others, and role as a guide to those in need.

Furthermore, Nausicaä has been seen to embody characteristics associated with the Greek goddess Artemis, the goddess of nature, wilderness, and animals. Reflecting Artemis's qualities, Nausicaä embodies purity, independence, freedom from jealousy, and a deep bond with wild and

untamed creatures, aligning her closely with the essence of the goddess (Bryce, 2012). Through the fusion of these influences—her connection and power to befriend insects, her mythological and folkloric roots, and Miyazaki's own philosophical vision—Nausicaä emerges as a deeply engaging and multifaceted protagonist. From the outset, she serves as a moral compass, mediating between humans and nature, ultimately assuming the role of a saviour figure. This nuanced portrayal underscores her significance as a cornerstone of Miyazaki's environmental ethos and narrative philosophy.

The opening scenes of the film introduce the protagonist's distinctive qualities through her exploration of the toxic and enigmatic *fukai*. The spirited 16-year-old princess of the Valley of the Wind is introduced as a skilled wind-rider, effortlessly manoeuvring through the forest on her advanced glider. Her curiosity drives her to collect samples for her secret experiments, and she demonstrates a deep fascination with the plants and creatures that inhabit this deadly environment. During her exploration, she discovers the massive shell of an Ohmu, a colossal, armoured, caterpillar-like insect. Nausicaä climbs onto the shell and carefully extracts one of its large eye covers using gunpowder. Delighted by her success, she marvels as spores from a nearby 'mushigo palm' fall around her like snow (McCarthy, 1999). Captivated by the scene, she observes the spores through Ohmu's eye cover, symbolising her sense of wonder and introspection, emphasising her unique ability to perceive beauty in a world marred by destruction.

Figure 1. Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind. Note: Nausicaä discovering the massive Ohmu shell in the middle of the fukai — timestamp: 5:48

Soon after, she runs off to save a friend, Lord Yupa, who is fleeing from an enraged Ohmu. The Ohmu are depicted as one of the megafaunas of this wasteland, which are unstoppable forces of destruction when driven by rage. Using a flash bomb to stun the creature, Nausicaä calms it with an insect charm and gently guides it back to the forest, demonstrating her ability to resolve conflict without violence. This act highlights her exceptional ability to resolve conflict through compassion rather than violence, a trait that deeply impresses Lord Yupa. A renowned swordsman and Nausicaä's mentor, Yupa has been journeying across the desolate landscape in search of surviving life forms and uncovering the planet's mysteries. However, his travels have only revealed cities reduced to ruins—either consumed by the encroaching Sea of Decay or destroyed by the fires of war. Upon reuniting with Nausicaä, Yupa introduces her to a small fox squirrel he had rescued during his travels. Initially frightened, the fox-squirrel bites Nausicaä, but her calm demeanour reassures the animal, which then licks her finger apologetically, forming an immediate bond and naming him Teto (Palmer, 2021). This pairing—Teto is seldom far from her shoulder from this point on—reinforces the depiction of Nausicaä as not only compassionate but linked to the life world of animals and nature more generally.

As with Miyazaki's later films, the environment is imbued with its own spirit and vitality evoking the animistic worldview in which all living things are believed to have a soul (Rheenen, 2011). However, unlike in some of his subsequent films, *Nausicaä* does not feature explicit nature spirits; the Ohmu are materially real, and the post-apocalyptic world they inhabit is not an otherworldly realm. Instead, the film implies an animistic perspective through the spiritual ethos of the Valley of the Wind's inhabitants, who embrace impermanence and adaptability, navigating their existence within the constraints of their environment (Palmer, 2021). Pallant (2015) identifies a Taoist influence in the Valley of the Wind, where the villagers' practices align with the concept of *'wu-wei'*—a philosophy of non-action that emphasises working in harmony with natural forces. This principle is evident in their use of windmills, which integrate seamlessly into the environment. Shielded from the toxic spores of the *fukai* by the ocean breeze, the villagers sustain themselves through agriculture and windmill-powered systems, employing technology in accordance with natural processes rather than disrupting them. The Valley's serene landscape—defined by clear water, gentle winds, and an unspoiled environment—stands in stark contrast to the apocalyptic wasteland of the *fukai*. Demonstrating their resourcefulness, the villagers also repurpose the durable shells of the Ohmu to craft weapons, their ceramic-like strength capable of cutting through metal. We could say that in contemporary terms they have achieved a kind of steady state or circular economy.

One evening, after Nausicaä and Yupa return to the settlement, a Tolmekian airship that is aflame crashes in the valley, having been attacked by enraged insects. It is an ominous event as the Tolmekians are cruel and militaristic people uninterested in living lives in harmony with nature. Nausicaä tries valiantly to rescue a young girl handcuffed aboard the wreckage, but the girl succumbs to her injuries. Before passing, she identifies herself as Princess Lastelle of Pejite and pleads with Nausicaä to destroy the cargo on the ship. Yupa later investigates the remains and discovers that the undamaged cargo contains a *Kyoshinhei* (Giant Warrior) embryo—a biological weapon from the Seven Days of Fire that one thousand years before had reduced the world to ruin. These destructive entities were believed to have been eradicated, and their remnants have long since been reduced to stone or vanished entirely. However, it is revealed that Pejite had unearthed the embryo, only for it to be stolen by the Tolmekians. The following day, Tolmekian forces invade the Valley and establish dominance by killing Nausicaä's father—the king—and holding the villagers hostage. Their leader, the Imperial Princess Kushana, declares her plan to revive the *kyoshinhei* as a weapon to destroy the *fukai*, asserting that this action is necessary to free humanity from the toxic jungle. However, Obaba, the Valley's wise elder, warns Kushana and everyone present of the catastrophic consequences. She recounts how past attempts to burn the *fukai* only provoked the Ohmu into frenzied stampedes, devastating the land in their wake. Undeterred by this historical wisdom, the Tolmekians persist in their plans, imposing their will with unwavering determination by enslaving the valley-dwellers (Palmer, 2021).

Oppositions and juxtapositions serve a significant role in *Nausicaä*, but the divide between good and evil is far from absolute. Kushana's relentless pursuit of eradicating the toxic jungle, driven by a disregard for its long-term consequences, reflects her draconian stance toward the environment. Her actions stem from a personal vendetta against the creatures that dwell there, further fueling her tyrannical approach. She embodies the trope of humans at war with nature that led to the Sea of Decay taking over the world in the first place. By contrast, Nausicaä embodies a remarkably different philosophy, striving for a deeper understanding of nature rather than seeking to dominate it. This stark juxtaposition underscores two opposing approaches to addressing environmental degradation; Kushana's inclination to exercise power and control over nature versus Nausicaä's commitment to harmony and coexistence (Pallant, 2015). Due to these traits, Kushana is portrayed as a ruthless political figure who can be seen to embody the socio-economic realities of environmental destruction in Japan during the postwar era, where breakneck industrial development brought many riches but also devastation. As such, her mentality accords with the wider prioritising of technological and industrial dominance over ecological sustainability in late capitalism. In contrast to *'wu-wei'*, the concept of *'yu-wei'* represents technological activities

that disrupt natural processes, symbolising the advanced civilisation in *Nausicaä's* world before its decline (Pallant, 2015). This interplay between *'wu-wei'* and *'yu-wei'* underscores the film's ecological message, cautioning against the dangers of disrupting nature while advocating for a balanced and harmonious coexistence.

Over the course of the film, Nausicaä's respect, compassion, and deep empathy for all living beings—whether humans, enemies, or insects—becomes increasingly evident. A notable incident occurs when she and Meeto are fleeing from a burning plane, which had taken them hostage en route to Tolmekia, following an attack by a Pejitan gunship. Despite the chaos and danger, Nausicaä instinctively reaches out to save Kushana, an enemy, demonstrating her unwavering commitment to valuing life over hostility. After an emergency landing in the Sea of Decay, right in the middle of an Ohmu nest, Nausicaä's unique ability to communicate with nature is once again on display. Surrounded by a horde of Ohmu, she calmly assures them, declaring, "They are not enemies," and establishes a connection through empathy and understanding. During this interaction, she learns that the Pejitan gunship pilot was alive after being shot down. Without hesitation, she mounts her glider, reassures her companions, and sets out to rescue the boy, further exemplifying her selflessness and determination. These thoughtful and compassionate actions encapsulate Miyazaki's moral universe, where empathy is not merely a virtue but a necessary lens through which to engage with the world. The film prompts viewers to embrace human limitations, perceive nature as it is rather than through the lens of exploitation, and acknowledge the inherent value of the unknown and the unknowable. Nausicaä's character embodies these principles, serving as a beacon of hope and understanding in an otherwise fractured and antagonistic world (Gossin, 2015).

This glimmer of hope takes a tangible form through Nausicaä's meticulous research, conducted in her hidden basement laboratory. She had revealed her recent discovery to Yupa, explaining how plants she collected from the *fukai* can be rendered non-toxic. Driven by a desire to save her ailing father and others affected by the toxic spores, Nausicaä discovers that watering the spores with clean water and nurturing them in uncontaminated soil removes their toxicity. This revelation becomes pivotal later in the narrative when Nausicaä and Asbel, the Pejitan pilot, stumble upon an underground world beneath the *fukai*. This hidden realm, composed of fossilised trees, rooted from the layers above, is untouched by toxins. The plants of the *fukai* have naturally filtered and purified the soil and water over time, creating an environment free of contamination. By connecting these two moments, Nausicaä arrives at a striking realisation that the jungle is not inherently evil. Its toxicity is a consequence of humanity's destructive actions, reflecting the

madness and hostility that once defined human-nature relations (Pallant, 2015). Despite being an artificial ecosystem born of egregious human error, the *fukai* has adapted, evolving into a force capable of healing the land and restoring ecological balance. Its trees cleanse the soil, and its insects serve as protectors, embodying a natural system striving for renewal. This newfound understanding fills Nausicaä with a sense of hope. Though nature is neither gentle nor forgiving, Nausicaä begins to believe in the possibility of reconciliation between humanity and the natural world, despite the inevitable challenges of communicating this truth to others. Her hope aligns with Miyazaki's perspective, as he reflects that such a venture requires effort, struggle, and the collaboration of people who matter to us. This shared endeavour, Miyazaki asserts, gives life its meaning (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 170).

Figure 2. Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind. Note: Nausicaä exploring the underground world beneath the fukai, with pure water flowing and fossilised trees rooted from above — timestamp: 1:04:13

Driven by her eco-conscious ideals, Nausicaä takes on the responsibility of rethinking humanity's relationship with nature and striving for a more harmonious coexistence. Her journey begins with a moment of deep guilt and self-awareness. After witnessing the Tolmekians kill her father, she is overcome by rage and retaliates violently, killing the soldiers responsible. However, this act deeply troubles her, and she later confides in Yupa, expressing regret for allowing hatred to consume her. She realises that violence does not solve the conflict but instead perpetuates destruction, both externally and internally. This revelation leads her to renounce violence, understanding that hatred and aggression pollute the soul and the world alike.

Midway through the film, Nausicaä is confronted by flashbacks that deepen her resolve. One pivotal memory involves a young Nausicaä attempting to protect a baby Ohmu from the villagers. Despite her desperate pleas, the villagers—her father included—forcefully take the creature away from her. This traumatic experience instils in her the realisation of humanity's deep-seated fear and mistrust of the insects. Palmer (2021) notes that this incident distinctly shaped Nausicaä's worldview at a young age, planting the seeds of her determination to challenge these fears and prejudices. This early lesson becomes the foundation of her lifelong mission to prove that humans and insects can coexist in the same world, despite the overwhelming barriers to such understanding.

The film appeals to the audience's eco-consciousness through vivid imagery and cinematic artistry, demonstrating the destructive consequences of unchecked hatred and environmental neglect. This is poignantly illustrated in the scene where toxic spores begin to spread through the Valley's forest, a direct result of the violence instigated by the Tolmekians. Faced with this escalating crisis, Obaba proposes burning the forest to prevent the Valley's inevitable doom. The villagers, deeply rooted in their connection to nature, are devastated by the prospect of destroying a forest that has stood for centuries, triggering an emotional conflict within their community. Meanwhile, another wave of vengeance emerges as the Pejitan forces manipulate the insects from the *fukai* to attack their own village, seeking to eliminate the occupying Tolmekian soldiers. Their plan to unleash the same destruction upon the Valley of the Wind to reclaim the *kyoshinhei* amplifies the cycle of hatred and violence. This chain reaction of aggression enrages the Ohmu, unleashing further devastation and underscoring the interconnectedness of humanity and nature—every action rippling outward with severe consequences.

In this narrative, the contrasting behaviours of the Tolmekians, Pejitans, and the villagers of the Valley are strikingly apparent. While the Tolmekians and Pejitans are driven by revenge and bloodshed, the villagers of the Valley exhibit a harmonious relationship with nature, largely shaped by their lifestyle, values, and faith in Princess Nausicaä. Their restraint and wisdom set them apart, captured poignantly in a line from a captured villager to Kushana, "You use fire, we use it a bit too. Too much fire and nothing will grow." This statement reflects the villagers' understanding of nature's balance. Their approach—nurturing the forest with wind and water while coexisting with the *fukai's* toxins—embodies a respectful and symbiotic relationship with the environment, offering a stark contrast to the destructive tendencies of others. Through these juxtapositions, Miyazaki emphasises the urgency of adopting sustainable and compassionate attitudes toward

the natural world, warning of catastrophic consequences when humanity's actions are governed by hatred and short-sightedness.

Even with a clear understanding of the consequences of humanity's actions, power-driven leaders such as Kushana remain steadfast in their destructive pursuit of revenge against the *fukai* and its insects. This inflexible determination encapsulates the broader theme of humanity's conceit, juxtaposed with the nuanced eco-spirituality implied in the film's climactic scenes—despite Miyazaki's own reservations as a director about overtly miraculous narratives (Greenberg, 2018). In a pivotal moment, Nausicaä selflessly rescues the baby Ohmu from the Pejitans, who have cruelly used it as bait to incite a destructive charge from the Ohmu horde. Fully aware of the personal cost, Nausicaä returns the baby to the enraged horde, sacrificing herself in the process. As the Ohmu converges upon her lifeless body, their fury dissipates, as if they comprehend her act of compassion and her plea to end the cycle of hatred. In a moment of arresting visual symbolism, Ohmu uses their golden tentacles to lift her body and miraculously revive her. Her dress is transformed to blue by the baby Ohmu's blood; she walks through what looks like a golden field (see *Figure 3. Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*). This image calls back to the prophecy Obaba had recounted, foretelling the arrival of a figure in blue robes walking through golden fields to restore harmony between humanity and nature.

Figure 3. Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind. Note: Nausicaä dressed in blue, walking through a golden field of Ohmu's tentacles — timestamp: 1:54:10

Nausicaä's actions are not driven solely by a desire to protect the Valley of the Wind. Instead, her resolution stems from an intrinsic need to end the hatred that has consumed both humans and nature—a hatred she finds unbearable. As Miyazaki himself notes, Nausicaä is not meant to represent a saintly figure like Joan of Arc; rather, she is a young woman who values all life, whether insect or human, with equal reverence (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 333). Her character embodies a delicate balance of traditionally feminine traits—sensitivity, warmth, and compassion—alongside traditionally masculine qualities such as resilience and heroism (Shore, 2013). Nausicaä's journey reflects a dual pollution—literal environmental degradation and a spiritual corruption fuelled by hatred. Her decision to reconnect with humanity and nature signals an urgent call for healing on both fronts. As Palmer (2021) observes, the forest's purifying qualities mirror the transformative power of love and forgiveness. Just as the forest cleanses the earth of its toxins, renouncing hatred and embracing compassion purifies the soul, addressing the spiritual pollution that fuels humanity's destructive impulses.

Through this narrative of interconnected renewal, Miyazaki compels his audience to reflect on the consequences of their actions. By recognising past mistakes and fostering eco-consciousness, viewers are urged to envision a hopeful future where nature and humanity can coexist in harmony, propelled by love, forgiveness, and a shared commitment to healing.

Conclusion

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind weaves a powerful eco-conscious narrative, offering a reflective interpretation of human actions and their environmental consequences. As it explores the intrinsic connection between humanity and the natural world, the narrative highlights how toxicity—both environmental and spiritual---arises from humanity's disconnection and ignorance of nature. Nausicaä depicted as a mystical figure is attuned to the natural realm, serving as a bridge between humans and the environment. Through her character, Miyazaki conveys the possibility of reconciliation and coexistence.

The film underscores the potential for humanity to achieve purification and renewal, mirroring the regenerating abilities of the *fukai*. Just as the forest works to cleanse the earth of its contamination, humanity too can transcend the pollution of hatred, ignorance, and division. This vision, anchored in hope, suggests that by recognising our mistakes and taking responsibility for our actions, we can aspire to a future where harmony with nature is not only possible but also foundational to our existence. The film urges audiences to embrace a way of life that coexists with nature rather than viewing it as a resource to exploit.

CHAPTER 5: Childhood, Nature, and Healing in Totoro (1988)

In contrast to the apocalyptic wasteland of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind,* Miyazaki's next feature-length film, (after *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (*Tenkū no Shiro Rapyuta,* 1986), *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro,* 1988) exemplifies, what Mumcu and Yilmaz (2018) term "responsible landscapes," illustrating a balanced and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. Released as part of a double feature alongside Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies (Hotaru no Haka,* 1988*)*, the production was a formidable endeavour for Studio Ghibli, demanding rigorous dedication to ensure both films met their high artistic standards. *Grave of the Fireflies* offers a heart-wrenching account of two siblings navigating through the wartime firebombing of Tokyo and the resulting devastation in the final months of World War II, culminating in their deaths from starvation. Its unflinching portrayal of suffering contrasts starkly with *My Neighbor Totoro*, which merges elements of reality and fantasy to deliver a narrative filled with Shōwa era pastoral warmth and enchantment (hereon *My Neighbor Totoro* will also be referred to as *Totoro*). Takahata noted an intriguing audience dynamic: those who watched *Totoro* first often struggled with the sombre tone of *Fireflies*, while viewers who started with *Fireflies* were able to embrace *Totoro*'s joyful charm without difficulty (Cavallaro, 2015, pp. 77–78).

Although both films were critically acclaimed, their initial box office performance was underwhelming, largely due to the poor seasonal timing of their release, outside of the popular summer season. However, *Totoro* gained immense popularity soon after, earning prestigious awards such as Best Photography, the Animage Anime Grand Prix Prize, the Mainichi Film Award, and the Kinema Junpo Award for Best Film in 1988. Unexpectedly, the financial lifeline for Studio Ghibli came not from ticket sales but from Totoro merchandise, particularly stuffed toys, providing a parallel with the marketing success of the Star Wars franchise. Introduced nearly two years after the film's release, these products achieved phenomenal success, transforming Totoro into a cultural icon and providing the studio with the financial stability needed to recover production costs (Cavallaro, 2015, p. 40).

In 1988, Japan's bubble economy was at the peak of a period of extraordinary growth, positioning the nation as an emerging global economic powerhouse while the West experienced a significant decline (Vail, 2017). As Susan Napier (2018) observes, this era of unprecedented prosperity was characterised by a culture of conspicuous consumption, with young people embracing designer fashion, sipping champagne, and favouring foreign luxury cars. However, this rapid economic and industrial development came at the cost of environmental degradation and a painful sense of

spiritual disconnection. Against the setting of this modernised and industrialised Japan, Miyazaki envisioned *My Neighbor Totoro* as a call to reconnect with nature and traditional rural life. He expressed his hope that children watching the film would be inspired to explore the outdoors, run freely through fields, visit shrines, crawl beneath houses, and rediscover the charm of rural Japan (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 355).

Through the lens of a child's perspective, the film exudes innocence, and a nature imbued with vitalism while weaving challenging emotions into its joyful narrative. Miyazaki employs a unique form of cross-world fantasy in *Totoro*, blending the mundane and the magical into a seamless, dreamlike tapestry. The protagonist crossover between these interconnected worlds, creating moments of wonder that evoke both whimsy and depth. However, this is somewhat undercut and grounded by scenes in which the young protagonists and their father visit their hospitalised mother, who suffers from an unnamed illness (possibly mirroring Miyazaki's mother's spinal tuberculosis) (S. Napier, 2018).

For Miyazaki, *Totoro* helped establish some of his enduring cinematic themes. Taking an entire year to complete, the film was conceived as a departure from conventional narratives that often pit children against adults. Miyazaki was determined to ensure the story avoided overtly religious undertones, despite the inclusion of Shinto-coded entities. Instead, the film is a celebration of the potential for harmonious relations between humans and nature, suggesting that we should strive to be good neighbours with the natural world (McCarthy, 1999, pp. 116–120).

Set in the late 1950s, the story offers a nostalgic depiction of rural Japan, a time before television permeated everyday life, portraying the beauty and simplicity of agrarian living. The narrative begins with the delight of the young sisters, Satsuki and Mei, as they move into their new-to-them *minka* or traditional Japanese farmhouse. Historically common in rural Japan, such houses are characterised by wooden frames, thatched or tiled roofs, sliding shōji doors, and an emphasis on natural materials and openness to the surrounding environment. These richly painted pastoral landscapes reflect a combination of real-world inspirations, including Seijo Sakuragaoka, the Kandagawa River, Tokorozawa in Saitama Prefecture, and Akita. However, the heart of the rural setting is Sayama Hills, whose verdant scenery becomes a character in itself (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 350). The film's environment—marked by thriving greenery, friendly neighbours, flowing streams, and expansive paddy fields—evokes a traditionally rooted vision of coexistence between humanity and nature (Mumcu & Yilmaz, 2018). This harmonious backdrop underscores the story's central themes. Miyazaki explains that the family's move to the countryside is motivated by the

need to create a healthier environment for the mother, who is recovering in a nearby hospital (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 51). This theme of nature's healing properties is central to the narrative, becoming even more significant as the sisters' connection with the natural world, epitomised by Totoro, aids them in processing their emotional struggles and finding solace.

Figure 4. My Neighbor Totoro. Note: The family moving into their new house, with an open setting and rural environment. — timestamp: 17:48

In the film's opening scenes, the two young sisters, Satsuki and Mei, arrive at their new home and begin eagerly exploring its nooks and surroundings. Their excitement peaks as they encounter a towering tree behind the house, which their father, Kusakabe, explains to them is a camphor tree, a symbol of divinity and coded as a dwelling place for nature spirits—including, as it turns out, Totoro. This moment foreshadows the profound connection between the girls and the spiritual world that will unfold throughout the narrative.

As the girls energetically explore the house, they stumble upon small acorns scattered across the floor and are startled by the sudden appearance of black, fuzzy *susuwatari* (dust bunnies or soot sprites) in the kitchen that are coded as animate beings by zoomorphic features such as eyes, arms and legs, drawn from Japanese folklore idea of *yōkai* (Syversen, 2023). Though initially frightened, they muster their courage to venture further into the attic, where Mei stays behind after Satsuki rushes down to help their father, determined to catch one of the mysterious creatures. Mei's bravery reflects her persistent desire to prove her courage, a trait that recurs throughout the film. She claps her hands in an attempt to capture one of the *susuwatari* and rushes downstairs,

eager to show Satsuki. However, upon encountering the elderly Nanny from a nearby farm, who has come to help the family settle in, Mei shyly hides behind her sister. She realises there is no dust bunny in her hands, only soot smudges on her palms and feet. The Nanny laughs warmly and explains to the girls that these creatures are soot sprites, who make their homes in abandoned houses but leave when the house is filled with life and laughter (McCarthy, 1999, p. 127). She adds a nostalgic note, revealing that she too could see them as a child, subtly hinting that such encounters are a product of youthful innocence and wonder.

Later that night, as the family bathes together, a fierce windstorm shakes the rickety old house. While the girls cling to their father in fear, Kusakabe breaks into hearty laughter, telling them that their loud, happy voices will keep the boogeyman at bay. His laughter diffuses the tension, creating a moment of comfort amidst the storm's chaos. Napier (2018) interprets this scene as a coping mechanism, where laughter alleviates fear and anxiety, offering a temporary sense of security and calm. This ties back to the nanny's earlier insight that joy and laughter dispel darkness. As the night progresses, the *susuwatari* vacates the house, their wispy forms floating upwards toward the camphor tree, symbolising the transformative power of happiness and life.

While the film subtly portrays coping mechanisms that mask the underlying anxiety, fear, and uncertainty surrounding the mother's illness, its central narrative is ultimately one of healing. This theme resonates deeply with Hayao Miyazaki's own childhood experiences. Beyond the broader impact of the post-war period, a more personal connection lies in the parallels to Miyazaki's mother, who suffered from tuberculosis (Palmer, 2021). Though the specifics of the mother's ailment in *Totoro* are never explicitly disclosed, Miyazaki's lost childhood is evident in the portrayal of the sisters. Satsuki embodies the stereotypical narrative of the "good child," prematurely shouldering adult responsibilities. She takes on a maternal role in caring for Mei, preparing meals, and assisting her father in managing the household. This dynamic mirrors Miyazaki's own childhood, where he often had to assume greater responsibilities during his mother's illness. By contrast, Mei's carefree and innocent demeanour represents the traits Miyazaki longed to embrace but was unable to experience fully during his youth. Her uninhibited joy and natural curiosity allow her to approach even the unknown, including mythical creatures, without hesitation. This reflects an instinctive bond with the natural world, rooted in her gleeful exploration and openness to its wonders (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 260). Despite these personal echoes, Miyazaki himself has stated that *Totoro* is not a product of his nostalgia for a lost childhood or an idealised family life. Instead, the film serves as an invitation for audiences to reconnect with the natural world (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 355).

Through Mei's innocent and fearless interactions with nature, Miyazaki underscores the theme of renewal and healing that such a connection offers. The emotional depth of the narrative is further enriched by the subtle yet pivotal presence of the girls' mother, who, though she appears in only a few scenes, serves as the emotional anchor of the story. When the family visits her at the hospital the following morning, the contrasting behaviours of the sisters reveal much about their characters and emotional states. As Mei throws herself into her mother's arms with unreserved love, Satsuki maintains a respectful distance and waits patiently. Her reserved demeanour underscores her role as the responsible elder sibling. Despite her physical absence and inability to contribute actively to the household, the mother takes great pleasure in offering small gestures of care, such as brushing Satsuki's hair and appreciating her efforts in caring for Mei. These tender moments highlight her enduring bond with her children and her efforts to stay connected despite her illness. However, her absence from the home, particularly from the lives of her daughters, introduces a subtle undercurrent of unease to the narrative. This sense of disconnection, though ever-present, is often mitigated by the family's collective efforts to mask their anxieties through laughter and moments of joy (Palmer, 2021).

Throughout the film, the body language and actions of Satsuki and Mei vividly reflect their maturity, responsibility, and individual personalities. Despite Satsuki's youthful exuberance and excitement, as seen in moments of exploring the house with her sister, she carries an underlying sense of poise, grace, and self-discipline. This is evident in how she patiently waits for her mother to turn her attention toward her, and how she consistently cares for Mei, even when frustrated with her younger sister (Shore, 2013). These moments of quiet strength reveal a depth of character; though outwardly cheerful and vibrant, Satsuki harbours a deep sorrow, a quiet burden she carries as the elder sibling. In contrast, Mei embodies innocence and curiosity. She is portrayed as a spirited, single-minded child, occasionally stubborn and reckless but fearless and full of wonder.

This is beautifully illustrated one morning when Mei, while collecting flowers in the garden, discovers a trail of acorns. Following the path, she encounters a tiny, white creature with tall ears. Intrigued, Mei chases, but the creature quickly vanishes beneath the house. She then spots the same creature again, now accompanied by a slightly larger, blue companion. The sound of acorns falling from their sack catches her attention, and her determined pursuit leads her into a tunnel through the bushes and into the massive camphor tree. Losing sight of them momentarily, she notices a glowing acorn near the tree's base. As she reaches for it, she accidentally tumbles

inside the tree and lands on a large, furry figure. Thus, the tunnel functions as a portal to cross over from the ordinary world to an extraordinary world. It situates the narrative within the sub-genre of Crossworld Fantasy, seamlessly intertwining elements of low fantasy literature. and corresponds to the stage identified by Christopher Vogel's step to *The Hero's Journey* known as 'Crossing the Threshold' (Baugh, 2023), as seen in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis. Rather than being frightened, Mei is fascinated by the enormous creature. She climbs onto his belly, tickles his nose, and affectionately plays with him, eventually naming him Totoro. The scene concludes with Mei peacefully falling asleep on Totoro's soft belly as he continues to nap, encapsulating an atmosphere of serenity and harmony. Mei's uninhibited interaction with Totoro underscores the purity of her character, illustrating how an untainted mind like hers instinctively connects with nature, free from fear or judgment.

Figure 5. My Neighbor Totoro. Note: Mei sleeping on the big Totoro and the two small totoros standing nearby — timestamp: 35:35

The sublime and nurturing qualities of Totoro are accentuated by the final high-angle shot (see *Figure 5. My Neighbor Totoro*) of this scene, which illustrates the green canopy of the forest arching protectively over Mei, the big Totoro and the two other small totoros she was running behind, as they rest together (S. Napier, 2018). Miyazaki's decision to have Mei encounter Totoro before Satsuki further underscores her unique openness to the fantastical. Her unfiltered curiosity and lack of fear make her the ideal character to initiate this connection with the enigmatic creature, symbolising a childlike ability to embrace wonder and magic without hesitation (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 362). This moment of quiet wonder highlights Mei's unique ability to bridge the realms of the

mundane and the fantastical, setting the tone for the film's deepening exploration of humanity's relationship with nature.

However, when Satsuki and her father discover Mei asleep in the bushes there is no sign of Totoro. Mei attempts to explain her encounter but finds herself unable to lead them through the fantastical portal. Although Satsuki and her father laugh at her frantic search, her father reassures her that he believes her, telling her she is fortunate to have met the King of the Forest. This moment subtly positions Totoro as a forest deity intimately connected to the ancient camphor tree. The notion of spirits protecting specific locations is rooted in folklore and resonates across cultures. In Roman religion, such entities are referred to as *genius loci*, protective spirits associated with particular places. Similarly, in Shinto belief, the concept finds an analogue in *dōsojin*, deities who guard boundaries and travellers (Manson & Tama, 2016). In keeping with this reverence, Kusakabe takes the girls to the camphor tree to formally express their gratitude and pay respects to the spirits for safeguarding Mei. Miyazaki revisits this idea of a 'spirit of place' in later films like *Princess Mononoke*, where the *Shishigami*, or Forest Spirit, symbolises nature's power and its role in maintaining balance.

As previously mentioned, the giant camphor tree serves as the home of the forest spirits, and worshipping it evokes Shinto ritual, given that Shinto is an animistic religion that teaches those spirits, known as kami, exist in nature. Miyazaki depicts these interactions with kami as offering protection to the human characters; however, they are not intended to convey dogmatic religious connotations. Supporting his outlook, Helen McCarthy (1999, p. 123) notes that "religion is a human construct and has nothing to do with nature." Similar to the camphor tree, which symbolises divinity, numerous other Shinto symbols are interwoven throughout the film, acting as supporting characters within the narrative. Reflecting the theme of purity in Shinto, the girls' innocence and purity of soul enable them to see and interact with spirits.

Figure 6. My Neighbor Totoro. *Note: Kusakabe, Satsuki, and Mei show their respect to the forest spirits at the giant camphor tree, the house of the spirits. — timestamp: 40:52*

Other Shinto symbols that contribute to the film's nascent eco-spirituality, which may seem unconventional from a Western rational perspective, include physical objects that often foreshadow events (S. Napier, 2018). The *torii* gate, a symbolic entrance to a sacred space, is a prominent element coded by Miyazaki to illustrate the entry point to the spiritual realm in his films. In *My Neighbour Totoro*, we also come across *Jizo* statues, representing the Japanese Buddha known to be the protector of travellers, especially children. The first instance occurs when the girls seek shelter from the rain at a roadside shrine. The second occurs when Mei, lost while attempting to visit her sick mother in the hospital, rests by the roadside, feeling exhausted and sad. Six *jizo* statues behind her subtly indicate her being under spiritual protection, and shortly thereafter, Satsuki finds her. Additional Shinto-coded elements include *shimenawa*, ropes of rice straw marking the presence of kami, and ornamented with zigzag-shaped white paper decorations called *shide*, seen on the camphor tree when the father and girls pay their respects (Gartlan, 2024).

As a forest deity or kami, Totoro and his innocent relationship with the girls embodies the film's core ethos of fostering a harmonious human-nature relationship, infused with elements of what we could describe as eco-spirituality. He is depicted as a hybrid of various species, combining traits of a cat, raccoon, and owl while possessing cuddly, bear-like features (Gartlan, 2024). Rather than being anthropomorphised, Totoro retains an animalistic essence. As a protector and

guide, he aids them in overcoming their feelings of disconnection, serving as a bridge between their emotional struggles and the healing power of nature.

This dynamic becomes particularly evident during their encounter with Totoro on a rainy evening. As Satsuki anxiously waits at the bus stop for their father with Mei asleep on her shoulders, she sees Totoro for the first time. The enigmatic figure stands beside her in the rain, exuding a quiet but totemistic presence that alleviates the tension of the moment. Demonstrating courage and kindness, Satsuki offers Totoro her father's umbrella. In return, before boarding the mystical Nekobus (Catbus), Totoro hands Satsuki a small leaf pouch as a gift. Later, the girls discover that the pouch contains seeds, which they joyfully plant in their garden (Palmer, 2021).

Miyazaki uses Totoro to personify nature's regenerative powers, casting him as a mediator between the natural world and human reality (Gartlan, 2024). This role is vividly illustrated in the magical sequence where Satsuki and Mei join Totoro and the 2 small Totoros that Mei spotted early in the film, in a night dance ritual around their newly sown seeds. The ritual, a jubilant dance involving rhythmic leaps and thrusts towards the sky, accelerates the seeds' growth into a towering tree. The scene climaxes with Totoro spinning a flying top, soaring into the sky with the girls as they join in his thunderous roar. By morning, the colossal tree had disappeared, but the seeds had sprouted, leaving the girls exclaiming, "It was a dream, but it wasn't a dream." This dreamlike sequence symbolises the eco-spiritual connection the girls cultivate through their interaction with Totoro (Palmer, 2021).

Napier (2018) further observes that the girls' participation in Totoro's roar signifies their discovery of their "voice," symbolising the emotional strength and sense of belonging they have gained from their connection with nature. This newfound bond offsets their fears and anxieties, providing them with a grounded sense of place within the world. Miyazaki masterfully illustrates this transformation as a source of healing and empowerment. The sequence also subtly integrates elements of Shinto-coded Japanese folklore, particularly the concept of *tasogare*, or twilight, a time when spirits are believed to be most active. Gartlan (2024) highlights the folklore of *kamikakushi*, or "hidden by kami," which suggests that spirits could take people—especially young women and children—into the spirit realm. In *Totoro*, this motif is reflected in the ritual dance sequence. While the tree's growth occurs within the spirit realm, its effects manifest tangibly in the human world through the sprouted seeds. Miyazaki's incorporation of this folklore adds depth to the narrative and its associated thematics, bridging the mystical and the real Furthermore, this Shinto-influenced belief system would later help inspire elements of *Spirited*

Away, further emphasising Miyazaki's fascination with the interplay between human and spiritual realms.

This interplay between folklore, eco-spirituality, and human experience elevates Totoro's role beyond that of a whimsical character, positioning him as a symbol of nature's ability to nurture, protect, and heal. The final sequence of the film poignantly encapsulates themes of resilience, familial bonds, and the restorative power of nature. After Mei goes missing in her desperate attempt to deliver a freshly picked ear of corn to their ailing mother, Satsuki frantically searches the countryside. Both girls are deeply shaken by the news that their mother's health has taken a bad turn, requiring her to stay in the hospital longer. Satsuki, typically composed and mature beyond her years, finally allows herself to break down, confiding in Nanny her fear of losing her mother. Mei, driven by her innocent determination, runs off on a daunting three-hour journey to the hospital but inevitably loses her way.

As the sun begins to set and her search yields no results, Satsuki, overwhelmed with desperation, turns to the magical camphor tree. This time, the tunnel beneath the tree leads her into Totoro's mystical realm, symbolising that the spirits will offer guidance in moments of need. Totoro, immediately responsive to Satsuki's heartfelt plea, embraces her and takes swift action. Carrying her to the top of the tree, he summons the Nekobus Totoro gently ushers her onto the bus, offering her a reassuring smile and waving goodbye. The Nekobus's destination changes to "Mei," and it races through the forest and village, effortlessly bypassing obstacles as trees and terrain part in its path. They find Mei safe but distressed, and the Nekobus, now grinning with satisfaction, offers to take the sisters to the hospital. From the branches of a nearby tree, they catch sight of their mother, cheerfully conversing with their father. Although the sequence is imbued with magical and supernatural elements, the narrative seamlessly bridges fantasy and reality. Their mother remarks to Kusakabe that she felt as though she saw the girls on the tree branch. Kusakabe's response—that it might indeed have been real—is reinforced when he finds the corn Mei intended for her mother resting on the windowsill, inscribed with "To Mother" (McCarthy, 1999, pp. 131–132).

Conclusion

Through the seamless blend of dreamlike imagery and grounded emotions, Miyazaki emphasises his ecophilosophy—where nature is coded to provide strength to confront and heal life's trauma. Satsuki's choice to seek help from the spirits of nature, rather than relying solely on the adults in the village, underscores the eco-spiritual connection that she and Mei have cultivated. While

Totoro is depicted as a forest spirit rooted in Shinto symbolism, representing harmony and unity between humans and the natural world, he is not explicitly based on any specific Shinto deity. This theme of spiritual reliance reaffirms the film's key theme, celebrating the nurturing and restorative bond between humanity and the natural world. Building upon this idea of reconnection, Miyazaki extends the narrative beyond the characters' personal journeys, inviting the audience to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the natural world. Despite the protagonists' struggles with uncertainty and fear, the film conveys an underlying optimism. By portraying nature as both a sanctuary and a source of resilience, Miyazaki underscores its essential role in fostering emotional and spiritual renewal. Through this narrative thread, he also seamlessly weaves cultural folklore into a broader eco-spiritual philosophy.

CHAPTER 6: Between Forest and Furnace: Dualities of Progress and Preservation (1997)

The conceptual predevelopment of *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke Hime*, 1997; hereafter also known as *Mononoke*) began in the late 1970s. The themes informing this work are clear in Hayao Miyazaki's television series *Future Boy Conan* (1978), which uses post-apocalyptic settings to explore environmentally sustainable communities against a backdrop of technological extractivism and human destructive impulses (Scally, 2022). Similarly, projects like Miyazaki's picture book *Shuna's Journey* (1983) feature imagery and plot elements, including a young prince navigating a perilous, fantastical landscape and the search for a better life, which is more refined in later Studio Ghibli films (Holub, 2022). While initially grounded in Japanese folklore, *Mononoke's* early sketches had notable similarities to Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* such as a cursed protagonist forced to marry a demon-spirit and the redemptive power of love. After the project was shelved for 15 years, Miyazaki revisited it with a different vision, foregrounding themes of nature's resilience, resistance against oppressive forces, and the search for utopia (McCarthy, 1999, p. 182). Despite being set around 1,500 years prior to *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, the film was conceived in part as a sequel to the earlier work, though on a conceptual rather than temporal level, in its more complex depiction of human and environmental interaction.

Unlike the gentle reverence for nature depicted in *Nausicaä* and *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Mononoke* portrays nature's fury in response to human exploitation. This shift introduced intense and graphic action sequences that shocked Japanese audiences accustomed to Miyazaki's more family-oriented works (Chute, 1998). Despite the dramatic tonal shift, *Princess Mononoke* achieved unprecedented success, becoming the highest-grossing film in Japan in 1997. Its blend of folklore, historical elements, and mythology resonated with diverse audiences, appealing to both children and adults (S. J. Napier, 2005). By the mid to late 1990s, environmental concerns such as global warming, deforestation, desertification, biodiversity loss, and ecological collapse had become central to public consciousness, and *Mononoke* taps into this gestalt. The film's popularity propelled it past the previous Japanese box office record-holder in Japan, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, earning over $150 million. Although its performance in the U.S. market was modest—grossing approximately $3 million due to prevailing biases against anime at the time—*Mononoke* marked a significant milestone as the first Studio Ghibli film to secure theatrical distribution in the United States (Cavallaro, 2015, p. 121).

In contrast to the relatively black-and-white ethical universe of *Nausicaä*, often considered a thematic precursor to *Princess Mononoke,* the latter provides no clear delineation between good and evil; rather, every character is burdened by a curse and consumed by fury (Pallant, 2015). How they navigate this fury defines their relationship with nature, reflecting the film's overarching theme of humanity's entanglement with the natural world. The rage of living nature, as represented by its various embodied spirits, is born from the consequences of human actions, underscoring humanity's ignorance of its ways. Throughout, the film conveys a sobering truth—many of our actions, even those driven by good intentions, often have adverse effects on the environment.

Mononoke intricately incorporates Japanese historical elements with folklore, creating a compelling exploration of environmental equilibrium and its sacrifice at the altar of human settlement, human greed, and the material processes of proto-industrial development. Like Totoro, who is coded as the spirit of place in the eponymously titled 1988 Ghibli film, *Mononoke's* Shishigami (Forest God) embodies the delicate balance between life and death forces of the natural world, a duality I believe aligns with the concept of Yin and Yang in Chinese Taoist philosophy (also influential in Japan). This philosophical framework, which embodies opposition, unity, and harmony in all things (Cao, 2022), arguably resonates deeply with the ethos of the Shishigami, serving as a metaphor for the balance of life in the biosphere. Set in a fantastical evocation of the Muromachi period (1338–1573), characterised by political and economic turmoil and the influx of Portuguese firearms, the film highlights the theme of environmental disaster (McNabb, 2016) befalling a relatively peaceful ecosystem as the extractive forces of proto-modernity strike. It portrays humanity's relentless drive to dominate and commodify nature, revealing the destructive consequences of materialistic pursuits.

The film is imbued with the breathtaking visual richness of meticulously crafted backdrops and an exceptionally high number of cel animation. While approximately 15 minutes of CGI are incorporated, they are seamlessly integrated with traditional cel animation (Denison, 2023). Notably, the worm-like tendrils of the tatarigami, the demon boar god Nago, were rendered using 3D digital animation. Such elements are deeply rooted in Shinto symbolism, evoking an ancient era often described as when the gods walked the earth. As Linden (2024) observes, Miyazaki intentionally set *Princess Mononoke* in the Muromachi period as it mirrors and anticipates the environmental shifts and evolving human attitudes towards nature in a way parallel to that of the contemporaneous twentieth century. By situating the narrative in this dynamic period, Miyazaki draws a parallel between past and present, inviting viewers to reflect on the complex history of

humanity's relationship with the environment. Departing from the conventional period dramas that had dominated Japanese cinema, Miyazaki crafts a narrative that centres on marginalised communities and the socio-political turmoil of this fluid historical moment. Influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) and *Seven Samurai* (*Shichinin no Samurai*, 1954), Miyazaki integrates rural aesthetics and layered storytelling into the depiction of the three central communities—the Emishi Village, Tataraba (Irontown), and the forest of spirits.

The film opens in Emishi Village, the home of Ashitaka, the main character who drives the story. Historically, the Emishi were an ethnic group that mainly lived in the mountainous areas of northern Honshu. The narrative complication from which the story unfolds is when Ashitaka confronts and kills a *tatarigami* (demon boar god) with writhing worm-like tentacles, who is threatening to devastate the village. During this confrontation, Ashitaka's arm becomes infected with a black, wormy ooze, a manifestation of the boar's hatred and fury towards humanity. The village's wise woman, Hii-sama, intervenes, using water to soothe the infection, and explains that the affliction is a curse from the *tatarigami*, later revealed to be a boar god named Nago. While this depiction might appear to code natural forces as antagonistic to humans, it is important to note that Nago's transformation into a vengeful demon was triggered by an iron ball shot by Lady Eboshi of Irontown (Tataraba), igniting his fury against humanity (Pallant, 2015). Cursed by Nago to be gradually destroyed and consumed with hatred, Ashitaka is compelled to leave his village in search of a cure. The wise woman instructs him to journey westward, urging him to view the world "with eyes unclouded by hate" to understand the source of his curse. Thus, the film adopts elements of a quest narrative that simultaneously serves as a journey toward spiritual insight.

Although very little historical evidence of Emishi culture, customs, or art has survived, Miyazaki imaginatively reconstructs their identity by drawing inspiration from diverse sources. The clothing of the Emishi, for example, borrows elements from the minority tribes in Bhutan and Yunnan, while their hairstyles reflect Chinese-style topknots (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 49). This creative depiction imbues the Emishi with symbolic significance, representing marginalised groups and highlighting their resilience in the face of societal exclusion. Miyazaki's portrayal of the Emishi reflects his broader commentary on cultural diversity within Japan, challenging the nativist narratives that seek to present a homogenous image of "Japaneseness." By depicting the Emishi as a minority culture isolated from mainstream Japanese society, Miyazaki underscores their unique identity and resilience. This stance aligns with broader debates in Japan during the 1990s and early 2000s surrounding marginalised groups and cultural plurality. Through Ashitaka's journey, Miyazaki

conveys that Japan's identity is inherently diverse, and this richness should be celebrated rather than suppressed (Linden, 2024).

Accompanied by his loyal steed, Yakul, a red elk, Ashitaka embarks on his journey, where he soon encounters a violent battle with samurai forces in a nearby village. In defending himself, Ashitaka discovers that the curse amplifies his strength which, fueled by hatred, allows him to shoot arrows with such force that they decapitate his enemies. Recognising the destructive power of the curse, he seeks solace in a nearby water source, calming the affliction momentarily. Water, a recurring motif in Miyazaki's works such as *Nausicaä*, *Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*, is portrayed as a regenerative element, symbolic of healing and the mitigation of anger and despair (Asai, 2011).

During his travels, Ashitaka encounters Jigo, a shrewd priest and an agent of the emperor, who observes the mark of the curse on Ashitaka's arm. Jigo informs him of *Shishigami no Mori* (Shishigami's Forest or the 'Forest of the Spirits') and suggests that he journey further west in search of answers. He also identifies Ashitaka as a member of the Emishi, a people believed to have gone extinct 500 years earlier. Observing Ashitaka's attire, red elk, stone arrowheads, and red bowl, Jigo comments on these cultural markers of the Emishi, who are depicted as the last remnants of a once-thriving but marginalised community and reassures him that no one will know about his identity. If Hii-sama is coded as a form of indigenous shaman, the wily Jigo embodies the caprices of courtly, organised religion and its corruptions.

Lady Eboshi, the leader of Irontown (Tataraba)—the second community depicted in the film—while a fully fleshed-out personality in her own right is implicitly coded to represent economic progress in the thematic clash between proto-industrial development and the natural world. Her character embodies humanity's drive to dominate and reshape nature, a force that places her at odds with the forest and its inhabitants. Eboshi and her men find themselves under attack by the wolf god Morro and her wolf children, including San, the 'Princess Mononoke', who identifies as a wolf. San harbours a deep-seated hatred for humanity, fueled by the destruction and suffering caused to her family and the natural world. During this attack, Morro is gravely wounded by one of Eboshi's firearms and goes downhill.

Ashitaka, continuing his journey westward, stumbles upon the aftermath of this violent clash and rescues two injured men who have fallen down a steep hill. In this scene, he catches a glimpse of San for the first time as she tends to Morro's wound, her face smeared with blood as she

attempts to draw out the bullet's effects. Her striking semi-animalic image (see *Figure 7. Princess Mononoke*)—coded in her fierce demeanour, fur clothing, and untamed presence—establishes her as a wild, untamed figure deeply connected to the natural world. When Ashitaka tries to approach, however, San swiftly retreats, avoiding human contact (S. J. Napier, 2001).

Figure 7. Princess Mononoke. Note: The striking image of San's blood-smeared face — timestamp: 22:35

Figure 8. Princess Mononoke. Note: kodama, the tree spirits looking at Ashitaka to guide him — timestamp: 24:05

Ashitaka's venture into the heart of the sacred woodland is guided by tiny, enigmatic creatures known as *kodama* (see *Figure 8. Princess Mononoke*). *Kodama* are tree spirits from Japanese

folklore and in the film's creative and stylised depiction, they symbolise a thriving forest. While Ashitaka reassures an injured man, Kohruku, that the *kodama* is harmless, Kohruku remains fearful, perceiving the forest as a place "haunted" by gods and demons. This otherworldly environment is filmically brought to life through sweeping shots of lush greenery, shimmering water pools, and fluttering butterflies, underscoring the forest's vitality and mystique (Pallant, 2015). The forest's guardian and most enigmatic denizen is Shishigami, who as mentioned is coded as the agent of both life and death within the natural order. Ashitaka glimpses this majestic figure, whose deer-like form features a red, humanoid face, expansive antlers, and an otherworldly golden glow. The Shishigami possesses a transformative power, appearing as a gentle, deer-like creature during the day and taking on the colossal, translucent two-legged form of the Deidarabotchi (Nightwalker) by night. In Japanese mythology, the *Deidarabotchi* is traditionally believed to shape the landscape, forming mountains, valleys, and lakes (Gartlan, 2024).

As Ashitaka and the men leave the forest and head towards Tataraba, they experience a remarkable sense of rejuvenation. Ashitaka feels invigorated, and the pain in Kohruku's arm diminishes significantly—an implicit nod to the forest's healing and restorative properties. This subtle detail reinforces the spiritual and regenerative capacities of the forest. Increasing evidence today suggests that immersing ourselves in nature positively impacts our mental and physical well-being, and even longevity, indicating that this connection might extend beyond simple superstition (Weir, 2020). Ashitaka's alignment with the Shinto beliefs, coupled with his courage and unwavering sense of justice, positions him as a mediator in the morally complex conflict between humanity and nature. Loved and respected by both the people of Irontown and the forest spirits, Ashitaka will become a bridge between these two opposing worlds.

On one side, Lady Eboshi and the inhabitants of Irontown embody industrialisation and technological progress pursued at the expense of nature. Eboshi, portrayed with remarkable depth, is a multifaceted character. As Miyazaki notes, "Lady Eboshi is the epitome of a twentieth-century person," symbolising modern ambition and resilience (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 61). She is a visionary leader, driven by a clear sense of purpose and an unyielding determination to provide safety and prosperity for her people. Ashitaka learns that Irontown serves as a sanctuary, particularly for marginalised individuals—its fearless female workforce is composed largely of former prostitutes whom Eboshi liberated, while its craftsmen are predominantly lepers whom she has rescued, providing them with roles in forging iron and weapons. This act of compassion underlines her ability to balance ruthless pragmatism with moments of heartening humanity.

Eboshi's complexity lies in her ideals and methods. She represents humanity's instinct to survive and thrive, even if it means reshaping the natural world to suit human needs, and echoes Miyazaki's sympathy with human labour in pursuit of a better life. While her actions, including the destruction of the forest, may appear villainous, they are driven by her commitment to the survival and welfare of her people. Ashitaka, recognising this nuance, refrains from condemning her outright. Instead, he seeks to understand both sides of the conflict, navigating the ethical ambiguity that arises from Eboshi's ambition to dominate nature and the forest's desperate fight for preservation (Palmer, 2021). The conflict between Irontown and the forest is not presented as a binary of good versus evil but as a reflection of the broader struggle to balance human survival and ecological sustainability.

In sharp contrast to Lady Eboshi's industrial ambitions, San, raised by the wolf god Morro after being abandoned as an infant, embodies a raw connection with nature and harbours deep animosity towards technology and human encroachments that harm the environment. On the night of Ashitaka's arrival in Tataraba, San, accompanied by the two wolves, infiltrates the village with the intent to attack Eboshi, seeking vengeance for the destruction of the forest and the injury inflicted on Morro. This tense encounter escalates into a dramatic rooftop chase, with firearms blazing as San and Eboshi face off in an emotionally charged confrontation. Ashitaka, witnessing the mounting hostility, intervenes to prevent further violence. Displaying his cursed arm as spirit worms writhe ominously, he seeks to show the people of Iron Town that hatred itself is a destructive force, consuming him and threatening to kill him. Addressing both San and Eboshi, he states, "There is a demon inside of you. It's inside both of you." This line underscores how their mutual animosity fuels an endless cycle of destruction, tarnishing their very being. Ashitaka knocks both women unconscious to stop the conflict, lifting San and attempting to return her to the forest. However, the villagers try to stop him, resulting in Ashitaka being shot. Despite his severe injuries and profuse bleeding, the curse grants him extraordinary strength, enabling him to walk through the guards and force open the settlement's heavy doors. Upon reaching the forest and the wolves, San regains consciousness, expressing anger and confusion over why Ashitaka has saved her. Shortly afterwards, Ashitaka collapses from exhaustion and blood loss.

While San and Eboshi appear to be coded as opposites, they share more similarities than is first apparent. Both are driven by a fervent sense of justice and a desire to protect the oppressed—Eboshi champions the socially marginalised inhabitants of Irontown, while San defends the forest from human exploitation (Linden, 2024). Miyazaki's nuanced storytelling elevates this duality,

underscoring the ethical ambiguities surrounding the balance between humanity's relationship with nature.

A thematic parallel can be drawn between *Princess Mononoke* and Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel, which also explores the tension between human expansion and environmental preservation (S. J. Napier, 2001). While historically inaccurate and riddled with problematic depictions of colonizer/indigene relations, *Pocahontas* examines the colonial destruction of natural harmony and the resistance of indigenous communities to British invaders. Despite the mythical dimension of the narrative, Miyazaki by contrast provides greater historical realism in terms of the material setting of his film while also delving more philosophically into the tragic complexities and moral dilemmas faced by each community. *Mononoke* does not offer simple binaries of right and wrong; instead, it reveals the intricate interplay of survival, justice, and destruction.

After San carries Ashitaka to the heart of the forest, she places him near an island, leaving his fate in the hands of the Shishigami. Though she frees Yakul, the loyal red elk refuses to leave Ashitaka's side, remaining loyal to him. Shishigami intervenes, restoring Ashitaka's life but leaving the curse intact, symbolising that the burden of hatred is something Ashitaka must resolve on his own. At this moment, he begins to realise the depth of his bond with San and clings to the hope that she might come to see her hatred for humanity as a force polluting her soul. He envisions a possibility for eco-social balance; that is, a coexistence between nature and humans. Miyazaki's portrayal of this struggle, however, remains deliberately ambiguous, challenging audiences to reconsider their perspective on humanity's relationship with the natural world while not offering simplistic moralising or solutions. Without portraying a clear antagonist, the film depicts humankind's capacity for both good and bad actions in relation to one another and the ecology in which we are nested. He refrains from endorsing extremes, rejecting the violence both of invasive industrialisation that exploits nature as a mere resource for human ends and that which is potentially justified by ecological causes (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 32). Ashitaka's position at the heart of this conflict frames him as a mediator, one who does not fully align with humanity or nature but instead seeks reconciliation between the two.

However, as the film moves towards its climactic scenes one perceives a vein of pessimism that will ultimately be echoed in Miyazaki's most recent feature, *The Boy and the Heron.* Ashitaka's efforts to deter Lady Eboshi from her determination to kill the Shishigami prove futile. Undeterred, she advances into the forest with her men, joined by Jigo and his imperial agents. Priestly as well

as avarice Jigo represents the common pragmatic layman, someone who unquestioningly follows orders, even when the morality of those orders is deeply suspect. Acting under the emperor's directive, he persuades Eboshi to use her advanced weaponry to slay the Shishigami, lured by the rumour that its severed head grants immortality. Neither Eboshi nor the residents of Tataraba exhibit any reverence for the forest god nor any qualms about killing it, underscoring the extent of their detachment from the spiritual significance of their actions (McCarthy, 1999, p. 198).

Just as Lord Okotto, the boar god, leads his tribe in a vengeful charge against the humans for the devastation of their land and the killing of Nago, the climactic battle between the beast gods and humans results in catastrophic losses on both sides. Wounded by the humans' firearms, Okotto succumbs to a blinding rage, engulfed by the same curse that had turned Nago into a demon. San desperately tries to intervene, attempting to save Okotto from the consuming wrath, but his hatred, fury and vengeance overwhelm him. The curse consumes him, transforming him into a mindless force of destruction. Trapped in the writhing black tentacles of the ooze, San is nearly lost as Okotto's corrupted form lurches toward the Shishigami in a futile bid for salvation. With her last life force, Moro pulls San free from the engulfing mass. Shishigami's arrival brings an eerie stillness to the scene, momentarily silencing the chaos and destruction that has unfolded, and inviting the audience to reflect on the gravity of the moment. As previously argued, the Shishigami embodies the duality of nature, representing the intertwined forces of life and death. This balance is echoed in Moro's earlier words, "The Forest Spirit gives life and takes life." True to this principle, Shishigami draws the life of what's left of Moro and Okotto, granting them peace and undergoes its nocturnal transformation into Deidarabotchi.

As he begins to transform, Eboshi seizes the opportunity to act, firing a shot that severs its head. This act triggers a catastrophic though breathtakingly animated sequence, as the now-headless Deidarabotchi releases a torrent of toxic slime that spreads across the green landscape consuming everything in its path, stripping away life and leaving a desolate wasteland in its wake. The apocalyptic imagery underscores the film's central themes of balance and the consequences of unchecked actions and foreshadows the desertified wastelands of *Nausicaä*. The headless body, wandering aimlessly in search of its missing head, is coded to symbolise how the polluting force of hatred—rooted in humanity's greed and disregard for nature—corrupts not only the physical environment but also the spirit. This spiritual and ecological contamination manifests in the destruction it brings to both human settlements and the natural world (Palmer, 2021).

Figure 9. Princess Mononoke. Note: The headless Deidarabotchi searching for its head and lifeless kodama falling down — timestamp 1:55:09

Jigo and his men flee with the Shishigami's severed head encased in a wooden box, leaving devastation in their wake. The *kodama*, once symbols of a thriving forest, fall lifelessly from the trees like birds struck down. Lady Eboshi, too, faces the consequences of her actions, losing her arm in a final, vengeful act by the jaw of Moro's severed head. Amidst this cascade of destruction and death, Ashitaka and San manage to retrieve the Shishigami's head. He persuades San to join him in returning it, asserting that it must be done "by human hands," a poignant acknowledgement of humanity's responsibility to rectify its transgressions towards the Forest Spirit. When the Shishigami's head is restored, the god's body releases a powerful windstorm, sweeping away the pollution wrought by human greed and restoring vitality to the devastated forest. This act of regeneration transforms the ravaged land into a pastoral landscape, symbolising a fresh beginning. Yet, this renewal is not without its caveats—while nature has the intrinsic power to heal, it is humanity's duty to learn from its mistakes. Miyazaki underscores that civilisation's attempts to dominate nature often lead to destruction, and only by overcoming the hatred within ourselves can we begin to see nature as more than a resource to exploit (Miyazaki, 2014, pp. 85–86).

Despite its fantasy elements, the world of *Mononoke* is not an innocent, romanticised realm where nature and humans are in intrinsic harmony. As Napier (2001) observes, it "reveals the tragic complexities of history that affect us to this day." In response to Ashitaka's heartfelt question to Moro, "Why can't the humans and the forest live together?", Miyazaki concludes the film with

neither certainty nor easy resolution but with hope. The narrative suggests that a respectful and loving relationship with nature is possible if humanity abandons its impulse to bend the natural world to its will. While San's deep-seated hatred for humanity softens through her bond with Ashitaka, it does not vanish entirely. Recognising this, Ashitaka encourages her to continue living in the forest while he stays nearby helping the people of Tataraba rebuild their settlement. Lady Eboshi, humbled by the events, resolves to start anew, pledging to build a better town. The film closes on a cautiously optimistic note, with the reappearance of the *kodama* signalling the forest's renewal.

Conclusion

Miyazaki's ecological vision in *Princess Mononoke* adopts a more intricate and mature approach compared to the gentler environmental narratives in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *My Neighbor Totoro*. The film presents a thematically layered exploration of the fraught relationship between humanity and nature, embedding its message in an ethically ambiguous narrative. The recurring theme of fury manifests in distinct ways—Lady Eboshi's driven by economic progress and social justice, San's fuelled by vengeance on behalf of nature, and Ashitaka's marked by grief and sorrow (Linden, 2024).

By intertwining themes of environmental destruction, nature's resilience, and the cyclical balance between life and death, the film emphasises the interconnectedness of all living beings. Shishigami embodies the duality of creation and destruction, while the Deidarabotchi symbolises the consequences of greed and environmental exploitation affecting both the physical and spiritual environment. Ultimately, *Princess Mononoke* challenges anthropocentric perspectives, advocating for an ecological ethos rooted in balance, respect, and mutual survival (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 39).

CHAPTER 7: Ecological Consciousness in a Greedy and Polluted World (2001)

Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 Academy Award-winning film, Spirited Away (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*), is a story of enchantment about a young girl who inadvertently enters an extraordinary world, a spiritual realm populated by Shinto and to a lesser extent, Buddhist-inspired mythical beings. The film achieved monumental success, becoming the highest-grossing film in Japanese history at the time, with earnings of $230 million, surpassing Miyazaki's earlier masterpiece, *Princess Mononoke* (Cavallaro, 2015, p. 135). It also garnered widespread acclaim overseas, eventually holding the title of the second highest-grossing anime film globally, with a gross of over $383 million (Gama, 2024).

Much of this success can be attributed to its visually stunning animation, marked by original character designs, vibrant colour palettes, and a strong emotional core (Greenberg, 2018, p. 145). The film opens in the mundane world of contemporary Japan but rapidly shifts when an ordinary family unwittingly finds themselves at the fringe of an abandoned amusement park—an allusion to the many theme parks built and subsequently deserted following the economic collapse of the 1990s (Martínez & Mateu, 2022). There, they encounter a mysterious town where the titular character, Chihiro, witnesses her parents transformed into pigs. Forgetting her birth name, she must work within a towering structure known as the Bathhouse to free herself and her parents from the spell. The colour design is particularly striking, with red as the thematic anchor. Interwoven with warm tone of gold and orange, the palette creates a chromatic harmony that enhances the film's aesthetic richness. Another crucial factor behind the film's success was producer Toshio Suzuki's innovative marketing strategy. Suzuki orchestrated a multi-faceted promotional campaign through four prominent companies, permeating public consciousness with anticipation for the film well before its release (MacWilliams, 2014). However, the visual and commercial triumph does not shy away from a well-orchestrated message. I would argue that the transformative journey of the protagonist Chihiro to recover her name and discover her identity serves as a poignant metaphor for audiences grappling with their sense of self amidst the economic, political, and spiritual upheaval.

Thematically, the film critiques consumerism, capitalism, and environmental degradation, transporting viewers to the Meiji era (1868–1912)—a period of intense transformation in Japanese history. This era of rapid industrialisation and cultural exchange brought both progress and chaos,

a duality reflected in the film's narrative. The blend of Japanese tradition with Western architectural influences and philosophies of Meiji Japan is mirrored in the mystical town and the capitalist microcosm of the bathhouse (Suzuki, 2009a), with its hierarchical model of labour relations. Rooted in Shinto traditions, the film immerses its characters in a spirit realm governed by its own logic and elaborate rules. The narrative, as the title suggests, draws on the concept of *kamikakushi*—a motif from Japanese folklore previously explored in *My Neighbor Totoro* (Gartlan, 2024). *Spirited Away* also has links to the Western Crossworld Fantasy genre, in which a fantastical realm is accessed via a portal from the mundane world (like *The Narnia Chronicles* and *Harry Potter*) (Long, 2011) and absurdist literature such as Lewis Carrol's *Alice in Wonderland*. This fantastical realm, referred to as *fushigi* (strange or wonder), stands apart from the mundane world, a separation marked by Chihiro and her parents' passage through a tunnel (S. Napier, 2018).

The film opens with Chihiro, a typical grumpy ten-year-old girl, sulking in the backseat of her family's car as they drive to their new home. When the family gets lost, they come across a mysterious tunnel and decide to explore it, marking the beginning of Chihiro's transformative journey from timid and immature to someone who confronts her fears and matures through adversity. On the other side of the tunnel, they find a seemingly abandoned town, reminiscent of an old theme park. Curiosity drives the father to lead the way, with Chihiro trailing hesitantly behind. Enticed by the scent of food, Chihiro's parents discover a food stall filled with steaming dishes and begin eating greedily, ignoring her protests. While they indulge, Chihiro ventures off to explore the desolate surroundings and encounters a boy named Haku, who urgently warns her to leave before night falls.

Soon enough dusk falls and the street lanterns illuminate, casting an eerie red glow over the town. Panicked, Chihiro runs back to her parents, only to find they have been transformed into pigs. This startling transformation serves as a metaphor for the consequences of unchecked greed and materialism, echoing Miyazaki's critique of Japan's economic bubble era (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 217). The scene appears to be redolent of consumer culture and its endless appetites, fueled by the economic prosperity of a post-war settlement already in structural decline. As Napier (2018) observes, Miyazaki laments how money and industry 'darkened Japan's external landscape as well as its citizens' spiritual landscape.' Chihiro's father embodies vanity and entitlement, whereas her mother appears emotionally distant and detached from her daughter, emphasising this message. The film suggests that the path to redemption lies in hard work, kindness, and resilience. Her parents' fate serves as a stark warning against overindulgence, while her journey

may also be interpreted as a bildungsroman, depicting a young protagonist maturing by confronting fears and growing through challenges.

After witnessing her parents' transformation, Chihiro is left petrified, trapped in a surreal, otherworldly realm teeming with spirits. She runs back to the tunnel, only to find it transformed into a wide stream, with boats of spirits arriving at the shore. As her body begins to turn translucent, panic consumes her until an enigmatic boy called Haku intercepts her. He gives her food from the spirit world to anchor her existence and prevent her from vanishing completely. He explains that her only chance of survival and of saving her parents is to secure work at the bathhouse, a place where spirits and gods come to rest, ruled by the sorceress Yubaba.

To reach the bathhouse, they must cross a red bridge, a strongly Shinto-coded element symbolising a *torii* gate, which serves as a spiritual passage between realms. The bridge is a pivotal location in the narrative, marking Chihiro's first encounters with Haku and No-Face, and later, the site of her climactic confrontation with Yubaba. The film's opening scenes also incorporate other significant Shinto elements. As the family initially loses their way, their car passes an old *torii* gate leaning against a tree, surrounded by *hokora* (small shrine houses). These neglected and weathered religious symbols evoke the decline of traditional spirituality during Japan's Meiji Restoration era. Before entering the tunnel, they encounter a *dōsojin* statue, hinting at the spirits' presence and guidance. Building on Shinto folklore, particularly the concepts of *tasogare* (twilight) and *kamikakushi*, the film vividly portrays the spirit world as a realm distinct from reality, one that awakens and thrives after nightfall (Gartlan, 2024). Through these elements, Miyazaki weaves a narrative that is both deeply rooted in Japanese spiritual traditions and rich in allegorical depth.

Figure 10. Spirited Away. Note: Chihiro at the red bridge that crosses the bathhouse. — timestamp: 11:00

Following Haku's instructions, Chihiro ventures to the bathhouse's boiler room in search of work, where she meets the multi-armed Kamaji, the soot sprites (*susuwatari,* reminiscent of similar figures in *My Neighbour Totoro*), and Lin, a servant of the bathhouse. With their guidance, Chihiro ascends to the top floor to meet Yubaba, the witch who controls the bathhouse and persistently requests a job. Although Yubaba attempts to intimidate her, declaring that the bathhouse is no place for humans, Chihiro refuses to back down, enduring insults of being lazy, a crybaby, and spoiled. Bound by her own rules, Yubaba is compelled to offer her a deal, but it comes at a cost—Chihiro must surrender her name. Stripping her of her name and renaming her 'Sen,' Yubaba symbolically seizes Chihiro's autonomy and identity, reinforcing the theme of the power of names and words (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 198) (Hereon, Chihiro will be addressed as Sen until she gains her identity back). Under Yubaba's control, Sen realises she is slowly forgetting her real name. Haku assigns Sen to assist Lin as a bathhouse helper, marking the beginning of her arduous journey of transformation.

On her first day, Sen encounters No-Face whom she had caught a glimpse of on the bridge, a masked spirit standing in the rain, and out of kindness, she leaves the door open for him—a decision she later regrets. Initially conceived as a minor character loitering around the bridge (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 206), No-Face evolves into a pivotal figure in the narrative. He fixates on Sen, attempting to buy her affection with gold and offering assistance that we cannot help but feel will have strings attached. His growing presence culminates in chaos as he floods the bathhouse with gold, enticing the attendants to fawn over him in exchange for endless food and services (see

Figure 11. Spirited Away). No-Face emerges as another powerful metaphor for human greed and overconsumption, driven by a longing for attention and validation (Cavallaro, 2015, p. 137). The bathhouse, under Yubaba's reign, encapsulates these themes of excess and the erosion of identity, mirroring a modern world disconnected from nature by materialism and self-interest.

Figure 11. Spirited Away. Note: The bathhouse attendees fawn over No-Face, begging for more gold as they entertain him. — timestamp: 1:14:58

Expanding on the themes of urbanisation's impact on the environment and society, I interpret the narrative as extending the idea of pollution in the human world to the representational plane of the 'other world.' Bartolomei, Ippolito, and Mezzino (2023) suggest that the bathhouse, operated by morally compromised characters, symbolises "the exploitation of nature for personal gain." The theme of environmental degradation becomes clearer in Sen's encounter with the Stink Spirit *(Okusare-sama)*, a pivotal moment in the film. Inspired by Miyazaki's experience of witnessing a river cleanup in the countryside, the scene depicts Sen, with the assistance of the bathhouse staff, pulling out a torrent of debris trapped within the Stink Spirit (Clode & Wright, 2005). Once freed from the accumulated pollution of modern life, the spirit is revealed to be the Noble River Spirit (*Kawa no Kami*), who commends Sen's efforts, gifts her a herbal cake as a reward, and transforms into a dragon to ascend into the sky. The significance of the herbal cake unfolds as the narrative progresses. It serves as a cure, first used by Sen to break the curse affecting Haku after he steals Yubaba's twin sister Zeniba's seal. Later, she uses it to force No-Face to spit out everything he had consumed, including the workers, symbolically purging greed and excess.

Although Haku serves as Yubaba's henchman, he plays a crucial role in Sen's journey to rescue her parents and develop her own strength. However, he is compelled to carry out her sinister tasks, such as stealing Zeniba's seal, an act that nearly costs him his life. In his dragon form, Haku becomes gravely wounded, and Sen, trusting her instincts, recognises him and rushes to Yubaba's chambers to help. There, she finds the injured dragon alongside Yubaba's spoiled child, Bo, and Zeniba herself. After confronting Haku, Zeniba casts transformative spells, turning Bo into a mouse and a bird into a buzzing insect—companions who later join Sen on her journey to Zeniba's home. Driven by her growing affection for Haku and a sense of responsibility, Sen resolves to return the stolen seal to Zeniba. With the help of Kamaji and Lin, she boards a train to Zeniba's residence, accompanied by an unlikely group of companions—the mouse, carried by the insect, and No-Face. This train scene is strikingly serene, almost dreamlike, as Sen sits quietly alongside her peculiar friends and shadowy passengers (see *Figure 12. Spirited Away*). It provides a stark contrast to the frantic pace of her earlier adventures, marking a pivotal moment of reflection and maturity in this quiet transition scene.

Figure 12. Spirited Away. Note: Chihiro's train journey to Zeniba with No-Face, the mouse, and the flying insect, alongside shadowy passengers — timestamp: 1:39:35

Through this journey, we witness how far Sen has come. Once a lazy, pouty child disconnected from those around her, she now exhibits resilience, independence, and the ability to form meaningful relationships. Her transformation is not just emotional but also visually evident, symbolising her newfound strength and determination to navigate the challenges of both the human and spirit worlds (Asakura, 2017).

Upon arriving at Zeniba's cottage, Sen and her companions are warmly welcomed into a cosy, rustic home in a beautiful rural setting of bucolic fields and woods that exude comfort and care—a striking contrast to the cold, profit-driven environment of Yubaba's bathhouse with its relentless labours. Zeniba treats them with tea and snacks, offering a sense of kindness and hospitality absent in the capitalist framework of her twin sister's domain. Sen apologises to Zeniba on Haku's behalf and returns the stolen magical seal. It is then revealed that the slug expelled from Haku's body when she gave him half of the herbal cake was Yubaba's spell, marking the first step toward his liberation. As the group prepares to leave, Sen remembers her true name, Chihiro, symbolising her reclaiming her identity. In an act of encouragement and protection, Zeniba gifts her a hairband—a sort of amulet to safeguard her for the remainder of her journey. Shortly after, Haku, in his dragon form, arrives to take Chihiro and her companions back to the bathhouse, but No-Face decides to stay behind and become Zeniba's helper, a symbolic gesture of his renunciation of greed and his quest to rebuild his own identity.

As they journey back, Chihiro recalls a childhood memory of falling into a river and being saved by a dragon in the surrounding waters. She realises Haku was the river spirit of the Kohaku River who rescued her from drowning. This long-forgotten connection explains why Haku always felt a bond with her and never forgot her real name. With Chihiro's recovered memory, Haku too regains his true identity and is released from Yubaba's control. This moment reinforces a recurring theme in Miyazaki's works, paralleled in *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke,* deeply rooted in Shinto beliefs: the profound importance of connecting with nature spirits and the interdependence of humans and the natural world. Haku's entrapment in Yubaba's domain can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the consequences of environmental exploitation. The Kohaku River's demise, as a result of urbanisation and the practice of filling in rivers, symbolises the severing of humanity's bond with nature. By losing its vitality, the river spirit was trapped in the spirit world, subject to Yubaba's control (Clode & Wright, 2005).

By the end of her journey, Chihiro demonstrates significant personal growth, becoming more self-assured and resilient. This transformation is evident in her final confrontation with Yubaba, where she confidently trusts herself to identify that her parents are not among the pigs presented to her, thereby breaking Yubaba's contract and freeing them. As she leaves the spirit world, Chihiro reunites with her parents at the tunnel entrance, now restored to their human forms. When her father asks if she feels nervous about starting at a new home and school, Chihiro's response, "I

think I can handle it," encapsulates her newfound strength and maturity gained through her transformative experience in the spirit world.

Conclusion

Spirited Away serves as a powerful critique of modern society, using fantasy as a lens to illuminate its underlying flaws. Through the fantastical bathhouse, Miyazaki constructs a microcosm of capitalism, where a rigid, class-oriented labour system thrives under the rule of greed. This ironic portrayal highlights how people, regardless of status, become ensnared in a system driven by exploitation and self-interest. The film's depiction of the bathhouse reflects not only the pervasive greed in modern society but also its dehumanising effects, where identity and autonomy are often traded for survival. At the same time, Miyazaki adroitly intertwines this critique with an exploration of humanity's connection to the natural world, paying homage to Japan's cultural traditions and the animistic worldview inherent in Shinto beliefs. Through the journey of Chihiro, much like Ashitaka in *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki portrays an intermediary who bridges the gap between humanity and a Shinto-inflected spirit realm. The film's vivid landscapes further underscore the destructive consequences of human greed (Bartolomei et al., 2023), while also reminding us of the possibility of redemption through personal growth and reconnection with the environment.

By blending these themes seamlessly into a narrative rich with Shinto symbolism, Miyazaki crafts a universal message about the dangers of unchecked urbanisation, environmental degradation, and societal greed. In my view, it is this nuanced interplay of critique and hope, coupled with its exploration of personal transformation, that has solidified *Spirited Away* as a timeless masterpiece resonating with audiences worldwide.

CHAPTER 8: Navigating Grief and Ruin in The Boy and the Heron (2023)

The Academy Award-winning feature-length film, *The Boy and the Heron (Kimitachi wa dō ikiru ka,* 2023; hereafter also known as *Heron)*, produced by Toshio Suzuki, stands as Miyazaki's most personal work. Following the celebrated feature *Howl's Moving Castle* (*Hauru no Ugoku Shiro*) in 2004 the ensuing two decades were marked only by *Ponyo* (2008) and *The Wind Rises* (2013). For *Heron*, Miyazaki mines a variety of sources from his childhood to his work with lifelong collaborators and friends, the late Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki. In some ways, this can be viewed as a kaleidoscopic reflection of his earlier themes and issues, yet it remains powerfully original and possibly the darkest in tone among all his works. Released in July 2023, the film became another monumental success for Studio Ghibli, achieving widespread acclaim despite an unconventional marketing strategy that omitted images, synopses, and trailers (Kelly, 2023). Set within a surreal fantasy realm, the narrative presents an allegorical exploration of ethics and politics, drawing inspiration from Yoshino Genzaburō's 1937 novel *How Do You Live?* from which the Japanese release takes its title (Roberts, 2024).

The film has an implicitly political dimension, with Miyazaki continuing to critique both historical and contemporary Japanese nationalism by depicting a faction of parakeets who act as thugs in service of their leader, the Parakeet King. In addition to its political undertones, the film explores existential themes of life, death, and rebirth, while revisiting Miyazaki's hallmark interrogation of humanity's relationship with nature against a backdrop of global ecocide. Wunsh (2024) observes that *The Boy and the Heron* synthesise the eco-philosophical elements evident in earlier works such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, My Neighbor Totoro,* and *Princess Mononoke*. These films examine the devastation to ecosystems caused by human conflict, the possibility of harmonious coexistence with nature, and the inherent complexities of such a relationship. In the latest film, the protagonist's journey through grief and trauma in a fantastical world suggests the repercussions of humanity's relentless pursuit of an unattainable perfect world.

Several of Miyazaki's recurring cinematic motifs appear in *The Boy and the Heron*, which, like earlier Ghibli works such as *My Neighbor Totoro, The Wind Rises* and *Grave of the Fireflies*, is set during World War II. Other motifs include troubled child protagonists, Shinto-inspired elements that bridge the fantastical with the spiritual, portraying the environment as a sentient entity often disregarded by humans, and grotesque interludes that contrast with the film's surreal landscapes.

Alongside these familiar thematic threads, the narrative also serves as an introspective reflection on life, drawing on deeply personal aspects of Miyazaki's own experiences. These include the early loss of his mother and his father's involvement in aircraft manufacturing during World War II (Tugendste, 2024).

The film begins with an intense depiction of an inferno at a hospital, where the protagonist Mahito loses his mother, Hisako, setting the stage for his deep-seated trauma. A year later, and four years into the war, Mahito moves to the countryside with his father, Shoichi, who marries Hisako's sister, Natsuko. This early sequence establishes Mahito's unresolved grief for his mother, though he outwardly masks his internal struggles with maturity. Upon moving into his maternal family's home, Mahito is welcomed by seven elderly caretaker women and is met by a Grey Heron, who taunts him as he steps into the house. So far, the film maintains a realist style, leading viewers to wonder if it will replicate the sober and restrained tone of *The Wind Rises*.

However, the narrative takes a turn towards the fantastical when Mahito follows the Heron to a nearby abandoned tower. Although he collects a few feathers inside, he is unable to proceed further as the path has collapsed. As he exits the mysterious structure, the concerned cries of the caretaker women prompt him to return. Significantly, the feathers vanish upon his departure from the tower, a subtle code to a break from representational reality. This evokes the concept of *kamikakushi* explored in my discussion of *Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, hinting at the parallel universe within the tower that later becomes central to Mahito's emotional journey and development (Gartlan, 2024). Later that evening, Mahito learns from Natsuko, who is pregnant, that the enigmatic tower was built by his great-granduncle, who mysteriously disappeared shortly before its collapse. She sternly warns him against venturing into the tower, adding a layer of intrigue to its significance in the unfolding narrative.

Trapped in the emotional confines of grief, Mahito is haunted by recurring flashbacks of the night of the fire, now accompanied by his mother's chilling plea: "Save me." His uneasiness deepens as he struggles to connect with his stoic father, who often flaunts his wealth, creating an emotional gulf between them. At his new school, these inner conflicts push him into a fight. Overwhelmed by frustration and despair, he harms himself with a stone—a visceral manifestation of his internal turmoil.

The following morning, Mahito sets out to confront the Grey Heron, armed with a wooden sword, only for it to be effortlessly broken. It is then that the Heron's grotesque human-like form emerges,

and informs Mahito that he has been summoned, as though he were a chosen one. Manipulating him with the claim that his mother is still alive, the Heron plays into the Japanese cultural trope of herons as deceivers—the word *sagi* translates to both 'heron' and 'liar' or 'trickster' (Roberts, 2024). Despite knowing this is likely a lie, Mahito is drawn into the Heron's ploy, only to be engulfed by pond creatures in a sequence that metaphorically illustrates his suffocation and emotional distress. Snapped out of this ordeal by an arrow shot by Natsuko, Mahito later awakens in his bed, as though nothing had happened. However, subtle signs, such as the crumbling of the wooden sword he finds in the closet, suggest that his experience is more than just a dream. This ambiguity plays into Miyazaki's recurring motif of dream logic, reminiscent of *Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, where the boundary between dream and reality is deliberately blurred.

His resolve having returned, Mahito embarks on a mission to capture the Heron, crafting an arrow from one of its feathers. During this pursuit, he notices Natsuko wandering into the forest. Determined to save her, he follows and enters the enigmatic tower, accompanied by one of the caretaker maids, Kiriko. Inside, Mahito uncovers the Heron's deceit when a replica of his mother melts upon his touch, exposing the manipulation at play. The shadowy figure of the tower master, later revealed to be Mahito's great-granduncle, commands the Heron to act as Mahito's guide on a journey to an undersea parallel world. The sequence culminates as the three of them dissolve through the tower's floor, marking the beginning of an otherworldly voyage.

Mahito lands on an island within this underworld, a realm inhabited by the spirits of the dead. His attention is drawn to three massive stones situated behind a golden gate inscribed ominously with the words, "Those who learn from me shall die." These stones appear to reference historical tombs from East Asia during the era of Imperial Japan (Roberts, 2024). Soon after, Mahito is attacked by a flock of ravenous pelicans, frenzied and chanting, "Let's go. Let's go eat," but he is unharmed as he holds the Heron's feathers on his arrow. He is rescued by a fisherwoman who uses fire-magic to drive the birds away and restore a protective spell on the land, ensuring that the dead remain undisturbed. Resonating with the strong female characters of many previous Miyazaki movies, the fisherwoman, who is later revealed to be a younger version of the old caretaker Kiriko, takes Mahito under her care, guiding him to fish for the island's population. This community comprises shadowy figures reminiscent of *Spirited Away* and the *Warawara*, small, ethereal beings akin to the *kodama* of *Princess Mononoke*, symbolising unborn souls.

Figure 13. The Boy and the Heron. Note: The warawara welcoming Mahito and young Kiriko along with the large fish they caught. — timestamp: 1:01:10

That evening, a serene moment unfolds as the *warawara* matures in their gestation and ascend into the sky to be born. However, this tranquillity is shattered when the pelicans swoop in to prey on them. Miyazaki uses this predator-prey relationship as a powerful metaphor for the ecological imbalance caused by human interference in natural systems. While the natural world inherently operates on this dynamic, the film implies a disruption in this natural system that imperils the *warawara* with species-level extinction. The symbolism deepens when Mahito encounters a dying pelican, wounded by the magical intervention of Himi-sama (Lady Himi), a mysterious girl who protected the *warawara*. In its final moments, the pelican reveals that they were forcibly brought to this desolate underworld by Mahito's great-granduncle, compelled to feed on the *warawara* in a cycle of unnatural manipulation. The pelican says:

> “My kind was brought to this hellscape so we would eat the *warawara*. This sea has few fish we can eat. My kind were all starving. We flew as high as we could. But it always ended the same way. We could only reach this island. Now our newborns are forgetting how to fly. We eat the *warawara*, and the fire maiden burns us. The sea here is cursed” (timestamp: 1:10:53).

This serves as an analogy for the destructive consequences of introducing species into foreign ecosystems, a poignant reflection on the environmental crises exacerbated by human activity and

its role in climate change (Harris, 2024). The references to burning evoke the impacts of global heating, drawing parallels to the escalating firestorms and oceanic heat waves.

Mahito's great-granduncle constructed the tower as a facade to conceal a meteor that had fallen to Earth during the Meiji Revolution (1868), a discovery he made thirty years after its impact. One of the elderly caretakers reveals this to Shoichi, who also learns that the granduncle's mysterious disappearance coincided with that of Mahito's mother, Hisako, as a child, only for her to return a year later, happy but with no memory of what had transpired. This backstory is fleshed out when Mahito discovers that Lady Himi, the mysterious girl he encounters in the underworld, is actually his mother in her younger form. This revelation introduces a profound complexity, connecting the tower to gateways across multiple universes. Mahito's journey through this parallel world reflects the emotional turmoil within his own psyche, serving as a metaphorical landscape that mirrors his grief, longing, and unresolved trauma. Each challenge he confronts within this fantastical realm is intricately tied to his need for emotional reconciliation, as the narrative delicately weaves an emotional architecture for his healing. Through this symbolic journey, Mahito gradually begins to break free from his psychological struggles (Ting et al., 2024).

Returning to the film's environmental themes, Miyazaki subtly incorporates a critique of eco-terrorism emblematised by birds that have acquired the worst of human characteristics. The monstrous, man-eating and unnaturally large parakeets embody a distorted predator-prey dynamic. As Mahito and the Heron attempt to sneak into a house in search of Natsuko, they are confronted by an army of parakeets, whose insatiable hunger drives them to pursue Mahito. These parakeets, who worship a fascist Parakeet King, were similarly brought to this unnatural underworld by Mahito's great-granduncle, mirroring the pelicans in their symbolism of disrupted ecological harmony. Their existence underscores the malice that emerges when natural systems are manipulated and degraded. In a dramatic turn, Lady Himi arrives through a fiery portal and rescues Mahito, guiding him to safety. Her fearlessness and mastery over fire catalyses Mahito to confront his deep-seated fear of fire, a force never entirely within our collective control, which had been rooted in the traumatic loss of his mother. Once they reach her home, the pair share a quiet moment, eating bread and jam—a scene that evokes for Mahito a nostalgic memory of the bread his mother used to make. This brief respite strengthens Mahito's resolve to find Natsuko and bring her home.

The duo eventually sneak into the parallel version of the tower and locate the delivery room in the depths of the meteor, where Natsuko is being kept. However, as they approach the entrance, the

stone's energy zaps them both, symbolising the forbidden nature of their intrusion. Despite this, Mahito pushes forward, determined to face the consequences. Inside the delivery room, he discovers Natsuko asleep beneath large, spinning rings of *shide*—rice paper streamers that serve as a Shinto symbol of spiritual protection. These gently rotating streamers create a serene atmosphere for the vulnerable, pregnant Natsuko (Gartlan, 2024).

However, Mahito's entrance disrupts the tranquillity. The *shide* suddenly spins chaotically, flying through the room in an attempt to expel him. This pivotal moment triggers a profound emotional confrontation between Mahito and Natsuko. Shocked by her anger and her cutting words, "I absolutely hate you. Get out," Mahito is momentarily shaken. Yet, he recognises her pain and realises it mirrors his own struggle for acceptance. Overcoming this internal hurdle, he addresses her as "Mother Natsuko," an act that symbolises their newfound connection and his growing emotional maturity. Despite this breakthrough, the chaotic *shide* separates them, forcibly ejecting Mahito from the room (see *Figure 14. The Boy and the Heron*). The meteor stone's power then strikes both him and Lady Himi, leaving them unconscious and to be captured by the parakeets.

Figure 14. The Boy and the Heron. Note: The chaotic rice paper streamers separating Mahito and Natsuko from the delivery room — timestamp: 1:33:39

In another dreamlike encounter, Mahito comes face to face with his great-granduncle, the enigmatic master of the tower. He explains that this universe is precariously balanced on an intricate arrangement of stone blocks. With power drawn from the meteor stone, he constructed this realm in an attempt to create a world free from malice—an ideal social and ecological

environment. He then reveals his intention for Mahito to become his successor, entrusting him with the task of crafting a world without suffering, as he trusts Mahito's intuition to know how to maintain the enigmatic balance of the mysterious stones, which appear to act as tokens of a potential higher-order human ability to maintain a kind of cosmic equilibrium. However, this proposition leaves Mahito in a state of uncertainty. When he regains consciousness, the Heron frees him from his shackles, and the two resume their journey.

As they ascend the tower, they witness the Parakeet King parading the unconscious Lady Himi through a crowd of cheering parakeets. The scene is marked by flag banners with the word "Duche" (Duce) on them, a clear coding for Benito Mussolini, the leader of the formative Italian Fascist movement, who rejected the titles of democratic rule and instead designated for himself the appellation of Il Duce (the Leader) (Roberts, 2024). In this allegorical portrayal, Miyazaki casts the Parakeet King as a symbol of fascist rule, a flagbearer of authoritarian control and manipulation. In the contemporary context, it can also be taken as a critique both of resurgent Japanese nationalism and affiliated far-right movements globally. The Heron explains that the King seeks to exploit Mahito and Lady Himi's transgression of going into the delivery room to gain control of the empire from the tower master. This moment amplifies the tension within the narrative, as the tower master pleads with the King for more time to stabilise the universe. However, the King's dissatisfaction with this response drives him to act covertly. After returning Lady Himi, he secretly follows Mahito and the Heron, intent on uncovering the master's true intentions. Through these layers of political and philosophical subtext, Miyazaki critiques the fragility of utopian ideals when confronted by the ever-present forces of greed, manipulation and brute power.

When Mahito finally meets his great-granduncle face-to-face, he is asked to construct his own tower by stacking the untainted blocks to prevent the collapse of the underworld. However, Mahito declines, stating that he himself is tainted with malice, as evidenced by the self-inflicted wound on his head, which makes him unworthy to handle the pure blocks. Instead, he expresses his wish to return to his world with Mother Natsuko. When the granduncle hears Mahito's refusal, he questions,

> "You'll return to a foolish world of rampant murder and thievery? Soon it shall be consumed by flames" (timestamp 1:53:00).

The film's historical setting in the early 1940s alludes to the impending horrors of the firebombing of Tokyo (1944-1945) and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (6th and 9th August 1945, respectively). This seems to evoke not only the devastating wartime destruction but also resonates with the present-day crisis of a rapidly warming Earth, teetering on the edge of irreversible climate change. However, while fully aware of the pain and corruption it harbours, Mahito accepts that suffering is an inevitable part of life finding solace in the fact that, with companions like Lady Himi, Kiriko, and the Heron, it is worth living despite its imperfections (Placido, 2023). This realisation reflects an evolved if resigned understanding, that there is beauty in imperfection, a theme consistent with Miyazaki's personal philosophy as expressed in his previous works.

Figure 15. The Boy and the Heron. Note: The Parakeet King destroying the unbalanced stone blocks with his sword — timestamp: 1:53:45

The Parakeet King, enraged by the master's reliance on fragile blocks to sustain the universe, seizes control in a moment of defiance. He attempts to stack the blocks, but when the structure begins to fall apart, he destroys them with his sword in a violent outburst (see *Figure 15. The Boy and the Heron*). This destructive act undermines the very foundation of the underworld, plunging it into darkness and chaos. As the world begins to collapse, the great-granduncle urges Mahito and Lady Himi to escape through the corridor of time. Mahito is reunited with Kiriko and Natsuko, and together with the Heron, they return to their world in their own time—Kiriko and Lady Himi to the past, Mahito, Natsuko and the Heron to their time. The tower's collapse marks the end of their journey through the underworld, which is deeply tied to Mahito's emotional state. His acceptance

of Natsuko as his mother signifies his personal growth and emotional resolution. With the tower's destruction, the parakeets and pelicans manage to escape into the real world, where they transform back into their original forms.

In the final moments, the Heron advises Mahito to forget the events that occurred in the tower, suggesting that letting go of the past is a necessary step for moving forward. This conclusion emphasises the film's central themes of healing, acceptance, and the beauty found within imperfection, even that of a dying, burning world—messages that resonate throughout Mahito's journey and Miyazaki's broader narrative vision.

Conclusion

Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron* intertwines political, environmental, and autobiographical themes, offering no definitive answer to the Japanese title *How Do You Live?* Instead, it reflects on the inevitability of suffering, death, and the transient beauty of life, including that of the dissipating ecology of the living world as we enter the second quarter of the twenty-first century. The meteor's fall during the Meiji Restoration symbolises industrialisation's environmental toll, signifying a rupture in the harmony between humanity and nature, while the film's wartime setting alludes to the atomic age's destructive legacy (Wham, 2023).

On a more intricate note, the film's narrative revolves around accepting loss and embracing change. Mahito's eventual acceptance of Natsuko as his mother allows him to reconcile with the loss of his biological mother, demonstrating emotional growth through the connections he forges during his journey, mirroring Chihiro's transformation in *Spirited Away.* By weaving together Mahito's emotional struggles with both the real and fantastical elements of the story, Miyazaki creates a pathway for him to confront and overcome his grief, longing, and trauma. Ultimately, the film encourages resilience and finding meaning in connections amidst life's inevitable trials, a recurring theme in Miyazaki's oeuvre, given added impetus by the accelerating social and environmental crises of our times.

CHAPTER 9: FINDINGS

9.1 Ecological Themes Identified and Their Reflection on Environmental Issues

With the aim of uncovering the ecological themes embedded within Hayao Miyazaki's films and the codes out of which they are constructed, this thesis has examined five of his works—*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, My Neighbor Totoro, Princess Mononoke, Spirited Away,* and *The Boy and the Heron*—whose narratives embody his complex and shifting eco-philosophy, interwoven with Shinto and animistic influences. Through their portrayal of complex environmental themes within breathtaking visuals and layered narratives, they invite audiences to connect with ecological concerns on both a visceral and intellectual level. Miyazaki's narratives extend beyond dispassionate discussions of climate change, industrialisation, and deforestation, emphasising the importance of respect, reconnection, and harmony with nature.

This study enabled a form of adaptive thematic analysis to examine the environmental ethos depicted in Miyazaki's works. The fundamental processes of data collection and refinement of emerging codes and themes were deliberately adjusted to account for the complexity and ambiguities inherent in the multilayered cultural texts found in these celebrated anime films. In this context, codes were understood as the ways in which objects and characters acquire symbolic significance—whether through representation, signification, allusion, or emblematic meaning—often in ways that resist straightforward codification. These coded elements are foundational to broader recurring themes, including human-nature relationships, environmental exploitation, eco-spiritual connections, and emotional growth. Rather than approaching these themes in an atomistic manner, this study has adopted a more holistic perspective, recognising the intricate interconnections that shape Miyazaki's ecological narratives.

As discussed in earlier chapters, Miyazaki's films are not structured to provide definitive solutions to ecological issues; rather, they serve as reflective explorations of nature, humanity, and their interconnectedness. Miyazaki himself emphasises that Studio Ghibli projects are created for young audiences, with the intention of providing enjoyment while subtly instilling values that encourage healthy development. He notes that by incorporating themes of nature, he seeks not to dictate solutions but to encourage children to develop an appreciation for the environment (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 109). This aligns with my own experience of growing up with his films, where the ecological messages unfolded gradually over time.

The findings are structured thematically, examining how the selected films explore humanity's relationship with the environment. Through symbolism and subtle elements of Shinto philosophy—considered here as a set of codes embedded throughout the films—Miyazaki expands our understanding of the ecological dimensions of the natural world in a manner imbued with spirit. These findings not only illuminate the ecological wisdom embedded in his works but also contribute to broader discussions on how storytelling can inspire environmental consciousness at a time when new narratives beyond extractive capitalism are urgently needed to reshape humanity's relationship with the living world. The following section summarises these themes, suggesting how Miyazaki's films address the pressing need for ecological harmony in the face of contemporary environmental challenges.

9.2 Key Ecological Themes Identified

The body of the study has examined themes in these films 'vertically,' tracing them from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* in 1984 to *Heron* in 2023. This section explores 'horizontally,' identifying recurring themes across the five works.

- **The Interconnectedness of Humans and Nature**

The theme of interconnectedness between humans and nature emerges as a central motif in many of Miyazaki's films, encapsulating the core of his eco-philosophy. Far from romanticising or overly simplifying nature's gentler aspects, Miyazaki portrays it as a complex, dynamic force capable of both nurturing and destruction. Drawing on Ryotaro Shiba's concept of 'civility,' Miyazaki challenges us to shift our perspective on nature—from one of utilitarian conservation, where nature is valued for its usefulness to humans, to an attitude of civility, where respect is shown to nature even in its wildest and most untamed forms (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 213).

The relationship between humans and nature, as depicted in Miyazaki's work, is inherently one of interdependence—each relies on the other for survival and flourishing. In *Nausicaä* this interconnectedness is disrupted by hatred and greed, leading to the devastation of the world. Hatred manifests as pollution, corrupting both humanity and the natural world physically and morally, and propelling both toward inevitable ruin. The environmental destruction, symbolised by the toxic *fukai*, parallels humanity's greed for power, illustrating how both sides suffer from this disconnection. However, Miyazaki offers a vision of redemption through the *fukai* itself, which possesses self-purifying properties, symbolising nature's capacity for healing and renewal. This

recurring motif across Miyazaki's films conveys an essential message—nature has the ability to regenerate, providing humanity with a chance to reflect, acknowledge its mistakes, and restore balance. Healing, therefore, extends beyond the individual and becomes a metaphor for species-level self-awareness and reconciliation, fostering hope for a more sustainable future.

Nausicaä's journey epitomises this transformative understanding. Her willingness to sacrifice herself demonstrates her connection with the natural world and serves as a catalyst for humanity's collective awakening. Through her actions, Miyazaki urges audiences to confront the consequences of ignorance and disconnection, emphasising the urgent need to adopt an eco-conscious mindset.

Building on this exploration of the human-nature connection, *My Neighbor Totoro* presents a more nuanced and intimate portrayal of healing and spiritual reconnection with nature. Emerging from Miyazaki's evolving perspective following on from *Nausicaä*, this film reflects a gentler yet equally deeply resonant understanding of the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world. Through the character of Totoro, the enigmatic forest spirit, and the experiences of Satsuki and Mei, Miyazaki conveys that this connection serves as a vital source of healing, as well as emotional and spiritual renewal.

The film weaves elements of Shinto belief into its narrative, underscoring the spiritual essence of nature and its influence on human well-being. Moreover, the family's move to the countryside, prompted by the mother's illness, further highlights the healing properties of natural landscapes in contrast to urban environments. The rural setting, with its harmony between human habitation and the surrounding environment, serves as a sanctuary where emotional strength can be fostered, and trauma can be processed. This reinforces Miyazaki's argument that nature when approached with respect and humility, provides a space for recovery and growth—both physically and emotionally.

In contrast to Western animation studios such as Disney and DreamWorks, which often sidestep direct engagement with environmental crises and are anthropocentric in ethos, Miyazaki's films confront ecological themes head-on with remarkable depth and candour. While Western films like *Wall-E* (2008), *Over the Hedge* (2006), and *Moana* (2016) touch on issues related to climate change and environmental degradation, these themes often remain secondary (Patzner, 2024). *Princess Mononoke*, in particular, exemplifies the complexity of the human-nature relationship. Rather than presenting a simplistic dichotomy of good versus evil, the film delves into the nuanced

interplay between humanity's ambitions and the natural world's needs. It underscores that achieving true balance requires embracing both the constructive and destructive forces at play, advocating for coexistence among all living beings.

Mononoke arguably represents most intricate and profound exploration of Miyazaki's eco-philosophy. It masterfully intertwines themes of humanity's connection with nature, spiritual reverence, and the integration of Japanese cultural values into environmental consciousness. Through its richly layered narrative, the film transcends conventional storytelling, presenting a vision where harmony with the natural world is not merely an ideal but a necessity, even if such an outcome is by no means assured.

- **The Consequences of Human Exploitation of Nature**

The landscapes in *Nausicaä* and *Mononoke* vividly illustrate the devastating consequences of humanity's exploitation of nature. Both films underscore how unchecked industrialisation, driven by the desire to dominate and control nature, inevitably leads to environmental destruction, which in turn threatens the survival of all life forms. These cautionary tales resonate deeply with contemporary environmental crises, where deforestation, resource depletion, and the excessive burning of fossil fuels have accelerated climate breakdown. The repercussions—rising global temperatures, rising sea levels, erratic rainfall patterns, coastal flooding, storm surges, and flash floods—not only endanger ecosystems but also imperil human livelihoods and well-being (Mitchell et al., 2006).

Beyond the physical world, Miyazaki's films explore the connection between humanity and the 'spiritual' realm, suggesting how environmental degradation disrupts this delicate balance. Even those not inclined towards the religious elements of animism, Shinto and Buddhism with their reverence for living nature as an immanent form of divinity, these narratives can function non-dogmatically on the level of metaphor. In *Spirited Away*, the River Spirit, burdened by human waste, and Haku, trapped by spiritual disconnection, symbolise the destructive consequences of greed, consumerism, and ecological neglect. These films make it clear that the harm inflicted on nature reverberates across all realms, creating ripples that affect both the physical world and the less tangible dimensions of existence.

In *Heron*, Miyazaki further explores the impossibility of creating a flawless world. The granduncle's ambition to build a world free of malice is ultimately undermined by the insidious effects of greed, underscoring the inevitability of imperfection. The argument here is not to reject industrial and

technological advancements entirely but to approach them with responsibility and mindfulness. Sustainability, not unchecked progress, is the key to harmony.

- **Spiritual and Emotional Dimensions of the Environment**

The spiritual and emotional dimensions of the environment are consistently explored in Miyazaki's films, with animism, parsed via Shinto elements, serving as a cornerstone of his eco-philosophy. Miyazaki's belief in animism as a vital philosophy for humanity, particularly in addressing the deteriorating state of the Earth, influences many of his narratives. *Nausicaä* articulates this belief powerfully, presenting the essence of animism: the recognition that a soul (*tamashii*) exists in all life forms, including nature itself (Yoneyama, 2021). This perspective is further brought to life through *kodama* in *Mononoke*, the Totoros in *My Neighbor Totoro*, and the *warawara* in *Heron*, where Miyazaki vividly portrays the unseen spirit world within nature.

Among Miyazaki's works, *Spirited Away* stands as the most deeply influenced by Shinto principles. The film's landscape illustrates the encroaching effects of urbanisation on nature, with nature spirits and magical creatures retreating to the spirit realm in search of sanctuary. This narrative underscores the importance of preserving the natural environment and recognising the intrinsic bond between humanity and nature. Similarly, in *Totoro*, the idyllic landscape of dense forests, pristine waters, and lush paddy fields contrasts sharply with modern settlements and their underpinnings in anthropocentric worldviews, celebrating the magnificence and vitality of the natural environment under responsible human stewardship.

Beyond its animistic dimensions, the nature in Miyazaki's films also serves as a place of tranquillity and emotional growth. The natural landscapes provide a sanctuary for characters to confront and overcome their fears, trauma, and grief. Chihiro in *Spirited Away*, Satsuki and Mei in *Totoro*, and Mahito in *Heron* all experience transformative growth through their interactions with nature. These characters' journeys demonstrate how environments that allow children to smile, reconnect with themselves, and escape the harshness of the utilitarian world become sources of resilience and healing. Miyazaki's portrayal of these natural spaces not only highlights their spiritual significance but also affirms their role as nurturing grounds for emotional renewal and personal strength.

9.3 Relevance to Contemporary Environmental Issues

Ambiguity and open-ended conclusions are defining traits of Studio Ghibli films, reflecting the unpredictability and fluidity of real life. In my opinion, these ambiguous endings align with our

uncertain reality, where change is constant and outcomes are rarely definitive. This perspective can also be extended to the climate crisis. It is not that the natural environment was ever pristine or unchanging; rather, it has continually evolved, shaped by human actions and natural processes. For instance, the once-barren Hachikokuyama located in Tokyo during the Kamakura Period (1185–1333) has since transformed into a thriving forest (Miyazaki, 2014, p. 170). Another similar example for evolving nature, the efforts of a farmer in Uttarakhand, India, who over four decades revitalised a barren landscape by planting more than 100,000 trees, exemplify the resilience of nature and the possibility of renewal, even amidst significant challenges (Dutta, 2024). However, it is equally important to acknowledge that the scale of environmental harm caused by human activity often overshadows these acts of restoration, making it imperative to critically examine our collective behaviours and choices.

Through and beyond their direct cinematic artistry, Miyazaki's films serve as powerful mediums for fostering empathy and awareness. They emotionally engage audiences by illustrating the deep connections between humans and nature and the far-reaching consequences of exploitation. Importantly, these narratives do not dictate a singular path forward but instead offer nuanced insights into how small, daily actions—grounded in courtesy and respect for the environment—can contribute to broader ecological harmony. *Totoro*, for example, depicts a pastoral lifestyle that exemplifies simplicity and harmonious coexistence with nature. *Spirited Away,* on the other hand, portrays the interdependence between humans and 'spirits' (representing aspects of ecology), urging us to reconnect with the natural world, particularly in urbanised, modern societies. Through these portrayals, Miyazaki encourages reducing consumption, supporting conservation efforts, and embracing sustainable practices. His storytelling particularly resonates with younger audiences, subtly instilling values of environmental responsibility and conservation without overt moralising. This aligns seamlessly with the growing need for environmental education and the cultivation of eco-consciousness among current and future generations. Ultimately, Miyazaki's films transcend the realm of entertainment, serving as profound moral and philosophical commentaries on humanity's relationship with the natural world.

In conclusion, the findings presented in this chapter demonstrate the depth and complexity of the ecological themes imbricated throughout Miyazaki's films, underscoring their relevance to contemporary environmental issues. Through the exploration of human-nature interconnectedness, the consequences of environmental exploitation, and the spiritual and emotional dimensions of nature, these works not only highlight the pressing need for ecological balance but also inspire audiences to reconsider their relationship with the natural world. These

themes form a vital lens through which to address the complexities of our ecological crisis, ideally bridging the gap between awareness and action.

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the ecological themes in Hayao Miyazaki's films and examined their relevance in shaping perspectives on nature to address pressing ecological challenges. Through an in-depth analysis of five of Miyazaki's ecologically focused films, this study has identified narrative elements that encapsulate broader environmental themes. Additionally, it has explored how Miyazaki's environmental narratives intersect with eco-conscious storytelling, ultimately shedding light on humanity's role within the natural world and the responsibilities it entails.

Central to this analysis are the Shinto-inspired elements embedded in Miyazaki's films, which form the foundation of his eco-philosophy. Rooted in the Shinto worldview, which reveres nature as imbued with spiritual significance, but also developing it creatively in a modern context, Miyazaki's work reflects a distinctly Japanese perspective on the interconnectedness of all living things and their shared dependence on the natural environment (Yoneyama, 2021).

Specifically, Miyazaki's films underscore the following:

- The mutual dependence between humanity and the natural world, illustrating that harmony with nature is essential for both ecological balance and spiritual well-being.
- The consequences of unchecked industrialisation and environmental exploitation, which result in destructive ripple effects impacting both humanity and the natural world.
- The spiritual essence of nature as a source of healing, resilience, and emotional growth, conveyed through Shinto-inspired animism and immersive landscapes.

Collectively, these insights demonstrate how Miyazaki's eco-conscious narratives can inspire humanity to adopt environmentally responsible approaches to addressing contemporary ecological challenges.

This thesis contributes to the understanding of how animated films more generally may function as influential tools for environmental education and awareness, fostering connections across cultural, spiritual, and ecological discourse. Jun'ichi Takahashi, a professor at Waseda University, emphasises the importance of studying Miyazaki's portrayal of environmental destruction and its consequences (Miyazaki, 2009, p. 414). This research, alongside related studies, emphasises the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and spirituality, while critiquing contemporary society's prioritisation of needs and desires rooted in greed, which neglects the abstract yet critical

concept of environmental balance. Recognising that shifting perspectives is a gradual process, this study stresses the importance of fostering eco-consciousness in future generations, beginning with education and guidance for children.

Furthermore, every effort was made to ground the analysis in scholarly literature and Miyazaki's own statements, since the subjective nature of thematic analysis inevitably introduces an element of viewer bias. The inclusion of *The Boy and the Heron,* released only a year prior to this study, presented challenges due to the limited availability of academic resources and critical analyses, which constrained the depth of exploration for this film. Additionally, the niche focus of Miyazaki's ecological philosophy faced constraints due to the limited and interconnected body of existing scholarship, narrowing the academic foundation. Future research could explore ecological themes in Western animation, examining how their narratives reflect distinct cultural perspectives. Comparative studies on folktales, comics, and animations from other Asian countries could also provide insights into how storytelling traditions foster ecological awareness and shape environmental consciousness.

The impacts of industrialisation and ecocidal capitalism have diverted humanity from its intrinsic connection with nature, reshaping our perception of the natural world into something to be conquered rather than coexisted with. Yet, as Miyazaki's films remind us, nature is not an adversary but a partner in life. While it possesses immense destructive power, it also holds a profound capacity for restoration, offering spaces for renewal and healing. Miyazaki's narratives serve as poignant reminders of the fragile balance between humanity and the environment. They compel us to act with responsibility and urgency, fostering a harmonious and sustainable relationship with the natural world before it is too late.

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