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Untouched nature, mediated animals in Japanese anime

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- **htm**
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Untouched Nature, Mediated Animals in Japanese Anime

Ghibli is often mentioned as the animation studio, whose films address the problem of pollution. In *Kaze no tani no Nausicaa/Nausicaa in the Valley of the Winds* (Miyazaki Hayao, 1984) the main character Nausicaa studies the poisonous plants that are ruining the world. In *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi/Spirited Away* Chihiro has to bathe Kawa no Kami (The River God), whose body consists of things thrown into the river. Critics have pointed to the influences from authors such as James Lovelock and his Gaia theory on Miyazaki Hayao. Gaia is seen as a complex interacting system a single organism, where all living things have a regulatory effect on the Earth's environment that promotes life.

Lucy Wright points out to the similarities of Miyazaki's vision of the communion between human and nature to that of Shintoist belief system, the native religion of Japan (Wright 2005, s. 219-234). In Shinto the natural objects all have god-like spirit (kami) within them. Shintoism is people's interaction with kami in order to be able to live in interaction with nature. In Ghibli films it falls often to the young female character, a shojo, herself a young girl or woman in the transitory state between childhood and adult life, to negotiate the way between different conflicting groups and between humans and nature.

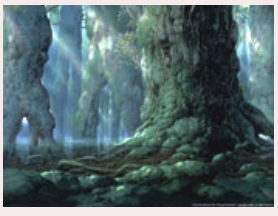
Another theme connected to nature and its disappearance in the Ghibli films is the nostalgic mode of narration. Susan Napier labels this as the elegiac mode (Napier 2001, s. 218-234). Marilyn Ivy's famous study on the nostalgia boom, which started in the 1970s, obviously comes to mind with such films as *Tonari no Totoro/My Neighbor Totoro* (1984). Marilyn Ivy's example is the Japan Railways advertisement campaign "Discover Japan", which was actually a reformulation of a former "Discover America" campaign. Contrary to the earlier travel ad campaigns, which concentrated on traditionally well-known places containing the highest cultural achievements of Japan, in Discover Japan campaign used rural, hidden, more remote villages and small towns were used as filming locations. Television ads and posters featured urban young women discovering the real Japan – and themselves – while traveling around Japan (Ivy, 1995).

In *Tonari no Totoro*, the village-like suburban setting of the two sisters' summer is reminiscent of 1950s Japan, an era when Japan was just preparing to enter the fierce economic competition. This time, Showa 30s, (1955-64) has recently been the setting of such nostalgic live action films as *Always – 3-chome no yuhi/Always – Sunset on Third Street* (Yamazaki Takashi, 2005), in which Japanese people, in this case the ones living right in the center of Tokyo, are still connected to their neighbors and surroundings, and thus this live action film becomes part of the recent Showa 30s nostalgia and media products centering around this era. Along the same line recent films from South Korea, Hong Kong and Mainland China are attracting Japanese audience, who see in their settings similarities to what Japan used to be a few decades ago. Takahata Isao, the other founding father of Ghibli, uses in *Omoide poroporo/ Only Yesterday* (1991), both the flashback scenes to the main character, Taeko`s 1970s childhood, and her summer vacation on a farmhouse in Yamagata as ways to make her escape her urban life as a Tokyo office worker.


Taeko escapes Tokyo to to rural Yamagata.

Miyazaki's himself has criticized the image of Ghibli as the studio who depicts wonderful nature. For Miyazaki, the interaction between humans and nature is a complicated one, and has so been since the dawn of the mankind. On the other hand, he is interested in Japan as it was before the establishment of the Yamato culture as the main culture of Japan. The Japanese have been equated with Yamato tribe, and therefore contributing to the myth of Japan as a homogenous nation and society.

In *Mononokehime/Princess Mononoke* (1997) Miyazaki pictures the main character, Ashitaka, as a son of the Emishi nation, one of the different tribes that existed in West-Northern Japan before the Eastern-Southern Yamato nation took over the country. Emishi, similarly to the other native tribes of Western Japan have often been seen as non-civilized barbarians as opposed to the Yamato race. Though *Mononokehime* is set in the Muromachi period (1333–1573), when the Yamato society had long ago conquered all the other tribes, the strong Emishi village of *Mononokehime* recalls pre-historic times. In the film's settings and details one can find numerous examples of Miyazaki's interest in anthropological and archeological studies, including the tower of the opening scene, which is similar to the remains of a Jomon period (10 000-300 BC) tower called Sannaimaruyamaiseki, in Aomori of Northern Japan (Saitani 1997, s. 74-81).



Another consistent stylistic motif in the settings of Ghibli films is the existence of traditional Europe. For example the towns in *Majo no takkyubin/Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Kurenai no buta/Porco Rosso* (1992) are clearly those of traditional European small towns, and Miyazaki's son Miyazaki Goro awakens again the pastoral farming village of Miyazaki & Takahata's 1970s television anime series *Arupusu no shojo Heidi/Heidi the Girl of the Alps*, in his 2006 film *Gedo senki/Tales from Earthsea*. The music of the aforementioned Takahata

Isao film *Omoide poroporo* is not Japanese, but a Bulgarian folk music -inspired musical track that plays prominently over the shots featuring Yamagata's farming fields. Thereby in Ghibli films this nostalgia for past Japan is mixed with images of a, what is seen as a more traditional Europe.

The ancient forest in Mononokehime.

Animals and society

In Japanese traditional art kemono, beasts or animals, are a recurring topic. The term kemonomimi, literally animal ears, refers to anime and manga featuring human characters with animals-like additions, such as ears. An obvious example is Ghibli's *Neko no ongaeshi/ The Cat Returns* (directed by Morita Hiroyuki, 2002), in which the main character Haru is invited into the cats' kingdom, and almost married to a cat prince, at which point she starts developing cat-like features. Wild-looking animals are present especially in *Mononokehime*'s wolf-mother character Moro, but another occurring feature in Ghibli films is the use of anthropomorphized, human-like animals. While animals per se are creatures of the nature, in animated films anthropomorphized, humanlike animals take the stage. This is nothing particular to Ghibli – the use of animals is a common feature right from the beginning of animation, ranging from Disney's Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck to the animated versions of educational Finnish folk tales, depicting foxes, bears and wolves. If we were to look for a Japanese animated film with realistic depiction of animals, the films by Oshii Mamoru, stand as a sharp contrast to the picturing of animals in the majority of animated films. For example, *Avalon* (2001) and *Inosensu: Kôkaku kidôtai/Ghost in the Shell: Innocence* (2004), feature dogs as animals, not as humans in animal fur.

Drawn and paper-cut animals appear in films right from the beginning of Japan's animation industry. The most popular animated animals are those belonging to Japan's nature and communities, such as tanuki (Japanese raccoon), hares, monkeys, foxes and frogs, and, of course, such domesticated animals as dogs and cats. These animal depictions, similarly to the Finnish folktales about foxes and bears, have a long history in Japanese mythology, folk tales and art, and thus bear connotations from before. For example, in Japanese mythology, foxes can take the form of a woman, and thus deceive men, and fictional tanuki are specialized in shaping into any form, and cheating humans whenever they can.

Example of kemono.

Hare is a common motif in Japanese decorative art, appearing in everything from sake cups to yukata. While the Westerners see a face in the moon, the Japanese see there a hare pounding mochi rice. The popularity of hare stems from China, where it was already seen as a protective animal. There are numerous Buddhist influenced folktales in Japan, depicting a hare curing a horse, sacrificing itself (for which he got an eternal life in the moon) and so on. Hares appear frequently in early animation, including the wartime animated versions of the traditional fairytale *Momotaro* (Peach Boy). In the original fairytale version, known by every Japanese child, an elderly couple finds a baby boy inside of a huge peach. The boy grows up to be a brave little samurai boy, and goes on fighting the demons. Along his adventures a dog, a monkey and a pheasant help him to beat the demons.

The Cat Returns

In the animated film versions, produced during the 15/year war (1931-1945), monkeys and dogs, along with various birds, do appear, but notable is the addition of hare, the happy-go-lucky, but also self-sacrificing animal, into Captain Momotaro's naval corps. In the film *Momotaro no umiwashi/Momotaro's Sea Eagle* (1942, director Seo Mitsuyo) the naval Momotaro-lead monkey and hare team bomb Pearl Harbor. In a later, 1945 film by the same director, the Japanese animals teach Japanese language to the "Asian" animals, such as tigers and crocodiles, with this Imperial Naval Office -sponsored film aimed to lecture on the homefront of the policies of The Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (Tsugata 2004, s. 105-8).

Ghibli animals

Momotaro is helped by hare in his fight for Japan.

Takahata Isao has published a book on the art of emaki, picture scrolls, which was published in relation to the 1999 exhibition at The Chiba City Art Museum. The exhibition showcased Ghibli's animation art and emaki scrolls side by side. Emaki is a horizontal, illustrated narrative form created during the 11th to 16th centuries in Japan. It combines both text and pictures, and is drawn, painted, or stamped on a hand scroll. Topics include battles, romance (the best known are emaki based on *The Tale of Genji*), religion, folk stories, and tales of supernatural world. The reading of emaki alone, done so that the right hand opens up the coming pictures while the left hand closes the scroll, resembles of a film turning on the projector. The same characters appear from scene to scene, with their story continuing.

Takahata, following the writings of the wartime film critic Imamura Tahei (2005), places Japanese animation and manga as the continuation of emaki. In his book, Takahata concentrates on the cinematic qualities of emaki, such as the varying "camera angles" from the point-of-view of the emaki drawer/viewer to the characters and scenes of emaki. In terms of the depiction of animals, of special interest is the well-known emaki *Choju Giga* or *Choju Jinbutsu Giga* (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals), a set of four remaining scrolls, created by a monk named Toba Sojo in the 12th century (Takahata 1999, s. 127-136). The scrolls are kept as one of the National Treasures of Japan, and their style has been imitated in popular visual art. *Choju Giga* depics various humorous scenes, in which hares, frogs, foxes, monkeys, birds and cats, standing on two feet and partly dressed up in human costumes, are involved in

humanlike activities, such as bathing in the river, competing in different games, and performing religious rites. *Choju Giga* has been interpreted as the author's satirical depiction of religious world. Still today, the humor, the lively feeling of action, and the various cartoon-like features of this emaki strike as very fresh, and it is very easy to see why a continuation of emaki and manga/anime can be claimed. According to Imamura and Takahata, this satiric depiction is continuing in the early Japanese animation. Influences from early American animation, such as Disney and Warner Brothers, were mixed with the images of traditional domestic animals. Early manga eiga (manga movie), or douga (moving pictures), as animation film was called until the end of World War II, was established as a part of the film industry in the 1920s and 1930s. Instrumental to this starting period are such creators as Ofuji Noburo, Masaoka Kenzo, and Murata Yasuji.

For example, Murata and Aoji Chuzo's 10-minute *Oira no yakyu* (Our Baseball Match, 1930) depicts a baseball match between a tanuki team and a hare team, while monkey appears as the judge. The ball gets batted into the woods, is eaten by a giant frog - drawn very similarly to the frogs in *Choju Giga* - who thinks the ball is a bird's egg. The simply drawn black and white animation plays with such visual gags, as the hare's ears turning around like a baseball bat, when the player waits for the ball to be pitched. These kind of animal gag films (Murata created several films picturing animals participating in various sports competitions), draw on the popular culture of their day – in *Oira no yakyu* from the baseball boom – and the ero-guro-nansensu (erotic grotesque nonsense) culture of Taisho and early Showa eras, which inspired also live filmmakers such as Ozu Yasujiro (Bordwell, 1988, pp. 151, 154). Takahata, on his part, draws on this pictorial culture, which ranges from emaki to different popular pictorial arts and finally manga eiga, in his own animal giga (satiric picture) *Heisei tanuki gassen Ponpoko/Pom poko* (1994). In *Ponpoko*, a tanuki community is threatened by the building project of Tama City in the midst of rural wood and small village scenery, where the tanuki live. The tanuki are pictures as having their village elders, regular, though in-efficient meetings, young flirting couples and so on. Tama City construction, currently a big urban suburb of Tokyo, was started in 1966 and the new inhabitants started moving in 1971. This is the time where *Ponpoko* is situated. The tanuki go on warfare against the humans, using their shape shifting skills – a common motif in Japanese folklore – as a means in the warfare. The film addresses the problems of urbanization on several levels. The Tama City project threatens their leisurely life, and destroys the woods, but at the same time, the tanuki are depicted dependant on humans. There is even a scene where the tanuki eat hamburgers.


Choju Giga, 12th century.

Ponpoko also has a more metaphoric side, as the humorous scenes, where the tanuki spend time in useless meetings of strategy planning, are a satire of the messy history of Japan's 1960s student movement (Takahata, 2005). Here, Takahata uses tanuki as a satire of human activities. Exactly the same was done in 12th century in *Choju Giga*, where the target was the religious life. In *Ponpoko* there are even more direct references to *Choju Giga*: in the scenes where they tanuki go on with the Project Poltergeist plan, namely arranging a magical shape shifting show for the new Tama City inhabitants, the figures they shape shift into include a wedding ceremony of foxes, reminiscent of the ceremonies depicted in *Choju Giga*.The shape shifting also appears on the stylistic level of drawing the tanuki. In *Ponpoko*, there are four different styles related to the depiction of tanuki. The film begins with a peep-whole image – reminiscent to the pre-cinema cinematic devices or the early cinema Edison kinetoscope – of a black and white tanuki, drawn in a very realistic style. Takahata continues with slightly more detailed but still animal-like tanuki roaming around their living quarters, and finally, when the tanuki start the first warfare towards another tanuki clan, they are drawn as gradually rising on two feet, with some clothing and armaments. At this point, their body also turns into a teddy-bear-like round shape. In one scene simple, computer-style depictions of tanuki do appear, as the tanuki play a video game, this of course being both another visual gag, and a comment on the tanuki society's co-dependence on the humans. The different styles equal to the different point-of-views on the tanuki. The humans see them as non-talking and animal-like, but when there are no humans present, the tanuki gradually change into their own self-image. At the same time, they are also a parody of the humans, with a more anthropomorphized appearance. Additionally, the different drawing styles work on a meta-narrative level, playing on the appreciation of the audience of the mere stylistic play of the film, and its references to different media and styles of drawing.


Oira no yakyu
(Our Baseball Match, 1931)

From real to fantasy animals

In Japanese animation, four different types of animals can be separated. First would be the animals, no matter how human-like they are depicted, which do naturally exist, and have been filtered through the Japanese imagination, and narrative and pictorial tradition for hundreds, in many cases over a thousand years. The above-mentioned films all have these kinds of animal characters.

A second group would be the similarly traditional but fantastic animals rooted in East Asian folklore, with kappa (water goblin) appearing often in animation (for example in *Kappa no Coo no Natsuyasumi/Summer Vacation with Coo the Kappa/*, an animated tale of a water goblin and a boy enjoying their summer together, by Hara Keiichi, 2007) and, of course, dragons. The latter appear in both father Miyazaki's film *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi/ Spirited Away*, in which Chihiro frees Haku the prince from the spell of constantly having to change into a dragon, and in the son Miyazaki Goro's film *Gedo senki/Tales from Earthsea* (2006) where the appearance of dragons marks the unbalance of the universe. Dragons seem to be seen in dual like, kind of like Godzilla, another fantastic animal: they are both to be saved and honored, but can cause trouble to humans, whenever they divert from their regular surroundings.A third group, not appearing in Ghibli films, are the robotic animals, with the


Pompoko.

blue robot cat of *Doraemon* as the obvious example. In this case, the already 30-year old animation series highlights the technological theme frequent in Japanese animation. In Ghibli films, these robotic animals have yet to be seen, as the studio is both thematically and in terms of animation techniques more interested in the traditional.

The fourth group would be newly invented fantastic animals, with Totoro being an obvious example, and the *Pokemon* and the Finland-originating *Moomin* examples of similar fantasy animals in other studios' productions. Totoro evolved from the television series *Pandakopanda* (Panda! Go Panda!, 1972-73), directed by Takahata, and scripted by Miyazaki. In *Pandakopanda* the 7-year old girl Mimiko finds a baby panda in her house, and later in the nearby forest, runs across the father panda, a huge cuddly figure, whom she names Papanda. The three befriend, and have numerous adventures during the series. It is easy to see in the story and in the figure of Papanda the prototype of Totoro. It is also interesting to ponder how the real Chinese bear evolved into the fantasy animal Totoro. One reason is obviously to highlight the difference of the children's world the adult's world, as the adults cannot see Totoro.

Animals vs. nature?

The reputation of Ghibli as the studio, which depicts wonderful nature is a complex one. As Miyazaki points out, on the level of the story construction, the Ghibli world is no cut into the world of good characters, who protect the nature, and bad characters, who use it. For example in *Mononokehime* Lady Eboshi ruins the nature with his gun-producing Tatara mine, but at the same time her industry is giving work and human value for women. Perhaps here Miyazaki is re-evaluating his own post-war leftist ideals. Miyazaki himself is interested in the primitive, shintoist, pre-high culture intuitive connection between humans and nature. (Saitani 1997, s. 77) His opinions also reveal a side close to some writings of nihonbunkaron (theories of Japaneseness). His appreciation for native, spiritually richer lifestyle, close to the ancient woods and mountains do appear in writings on Japan that can be categorized as nativism.


Pandakopanda.

An important figure in the human negotiation with the nature is shojo. the young girl figure. She is often depicted as being more connected to the nature than the other groups of the narrative. In Kaze no tani no Nausicaa, Nausicaa tries to protect the plants which others see merely dangerous. In Mononokehime, San, a girl raised by a wolf, is part of the nature. Chihiro is the only one who can wash out the dirt gathered in the body of the River God.

At the same time, the studio is remembered by its animal characters, which are filtered through layers of Japanese cultural discourse, as well as practices of visual creation ranging from emaki scrolls to the history of animation both in Japan and internationally. Animated animals state very rarely anything about the nature. Rather they are used to state things about us humans. Animation, as a form of film production, draws the depiction of human-like animals to extremities. Although in all kinds of fiction animals tend to behave humanlike, a big part of our enjoyment of animated films stems from particularity of animation as the film medium, which can depict the impossible, in this case, animals as living their life in a human-like way. Despite of all the CGI and special effects of live films, no other medium can as fluidly turn humans into animals and let animals behave like us.

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