"The River on that Day": Water and Identity in the Films of Hayao Miyazaki

by Christian Wilken
University of Koblenz,
Heinrich-Heine-University of Düsseldorf, Germany

*The author thanks Eyesha Elahi for providing valuable feedback on this article.

Introduction

Analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's movies can yield productive insights into the portrayal of the four classical elements: fire, earth, wind, and water. Fire, for instance, appears as a destructive force evoking the trauma of war, nuclear bombing, and natural disasters in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Kaze no Tani no Naushika, 1984) and *Castle in the Sky* (Tenkū no Shiro Rapyuta, 1986), yet also facilitates locomotion in *Howl's Moving Castle* (Hauru no Ugoku Shiro, 2004) and *Spirited Away* (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi, 2001). Earth, similarly, carries dual roles: as a source of life, seen in the nurturing of plants in *My Neighbor Totoro* (Tonari no Totoro, 1988), and as a harbinger of destruction, exemplified by the earthquake in *The Wind Rises* (Kaze Tachinu, 2013). Wind embodies both flight and enchantment, propelling airships into battle and conquest across films like *The Wind Rises* and *Castle in the Sky*. These elements resonate deeply within the cultural history of Japan, where each holds distinct utilitarian and metaphysical roles. Given its history of natural calamities and war, Japan is the only G7 country where arson is punishable by lifelong incarceration or even capital punishment. The nation's geography, dominated by mountainous terrain, emphasizes the preciousness of fertile soil and limited habitable land, while wind symbolizes both freedom and the peril of kamikaze pilots during WWII.

One can, however, make a strong case for water as the most significant element across all these realms. In Japan, the ocean is never far, and water holds a complex and nuanced role that spans utilitarian functions – such as production and nourishment – and spiritual dimensions, tied to the animistic realm of kami, divine beings in Shintoism. Hayao Miyazaki's movies echo these heterogenous sentiments, as his artistic vision naturally communicates between the post-Fordist capitalized Japan from which he conceives his films, and the cultural, mythological, and religious history with which they are so often concerned. This article will thus trace and analyze depictions of water and its relation to children across three categories – nourishment, reflection, and rapport. Finally, it will relate these portrayals to contemporary ecocritical reception of Miyazaki's deep ecology, arguing that his films are visionary in their profound ecological scope and nuance, reflecting key concerns of recent anthropocentric discourse. By focusing on this tripartite structure and its synthesization in the conclusion, the article will point towards the universal appeal of Miyazaki's movies for global audiences as per their multi-faceted utilization of water, particularly while engaging with children as a similarly protean and essentially pure force of nature.

Journal of Children in Popular Culture, Volume 14, Issue 1, Fall 2024
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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
Number: 1286882178

A Child's View

Throughout his career as a cinematic auteur[1], Miyazaki has consistently sided with the juvenile perspective. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, it is the four-year-old Mei who first encounters the eponymous nature spirit, with her older sister Satsuki and their father initially too preoccupied to believe her. Child protagonists also feature in *Castle in the Sky*, where they alone are unmoved by the allure of using the flying island as a weapon of mass destruction or by the legendary treasures it holds, in contrast to the respective imperial and pirate forces. In *Spirited Away*, the first of Miyazaki's movies to juxtapose contemporary post-bubble economy Japan with the country's rich mythological and religious traditions, ten-year-old Chihiro recognizes her parents' misconduct and their gluttonous consumption, leading to their transformation into pigs as a divine punishment. These portrayals resonate with the Romantic idea of children as virtuous beings unspoiled by modern society, but the notion is amplified by its entrenchment in Japan's religious and cultural traditions.

Susan Napier's *Miyazakiworld* (2018) explores Miyazaki's belief that "The child is proof that the world is beautiful" (xii), highlighting the influence of his upbringing in post-war Japan. She views children as a protean force capable of overcoming universal experiences of loss, nostalgia, and trauma in Miyazaki's apocalyptic settings:

> In Miyazakiworld little children become dynamic, responsible individuals. These children shoulder burdens and serve as guides, not only to their fellow characters but to Miyazaki's global audience. His utopian impulses have as one of their major foundations the notion of childhood as a space of innocence, freedom, and connection. […] the idea of seeing without the accumulated detritus of bias and prejudice brought by experience suggests a child's viewpoint, one that is infinitely clearer than that of adults. (14)

While the Romanticist tradition inheriting Rousseau's view of children as morally and perceptively superior carries religious overtones, Miyazaki's child characters act from an absence of societal corruption and possess an innate moral compass. They understand the interconnectedness of nature, humans, and even inanimate objects, which operate on a flat ontological hierarchy. In his seminal work *Emile*, Rousseau argues that children are born inherently good and are only corrupted by society (Rousseau, 1762). This belief is reflected in Miyazaki's films, where characters like Mei in *My Neighbor Totoro* and Chihiro in *Spirited Away* display innate moral clarity and a deep connection to nature, untainted by the ubiquitous adult biases. However, while Rousseau emphasizes the role of education in preserving a child's innate goodness, Miyazaki's young protagonists inherently resist societal flaws without external guidance. In *Castle in the Sky*, for instance, Pazu and Sheeta instinctively oppose the exploitation of the island's power, showcasing their autonomous moral agency. Miyazaki's children act as self-sufficient moral agents, reflecting a distinct cultural view on the inherent wisdom of the juvenile perspective.

[1] Susan Napier provides a concise summary of the term as "a director whose personal and artistic vision is so strong that each film consistently contains trademarks that make his or her entire work a distinctive cinematic experience (2018: x).

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ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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The director's focus on child virtue transcends mere philosophical musings and is rooted in specific personal experience. His family's involvement in the production of parts for WWII fighters and his awareness of the collective punishment inflicted on Japan for its war economy shaped his pacifist outlook. This pacifism originated from his family's escape from war-torn Utsunomiya, during which they, being relatively well-off, ignored the pleas of a local parent holding an infant to "take them on" (Napier, 2018: 12). This memory, alongside the guilt Miyazaki associated with his family's prosperity from the war, likely fueled his struggle with paternal energy – a force representing utilitarian exploitation of nature and even the divine, contrasted with the maternal alignment with nature and primordial magic. This dynamic extends to his child characters: Pazu in *Castle in the Sky* retains his virtue and affinity for animals despite his industrial surroundings, while his fascination with airships symbolizes a broader portrayal of boys reflecting the director's private fascination with machinery in Miyazaki's films. In contrast, Sheeta, descended from a mythical lineage of Laputans, embodies a time when true harmony with nature led to a sustainable use of advanced technology.[2]

Miyazaki's relationship with his father and his perception of Japanese identity evolved throughout his career. *Spirited Away* marks a turning point as Miyazaki's first film set in a contemporary context, reflecting the postmodern anxieties of a Japan haunted by its bubble economy excesses. The film's parents dismiss the religious significance of objects that mark their entry into what they assume is an abandoned amusement park. This irony underscores the overlap of Japan's mythological heritage with its later capitalist identity, as Chihiro's journey into a bathhouse of Shintoist kami is validated by a physical token she brings back to the modern world. Children in Miyazaki's films gain access to the spiritual realm because they enter it "with eyes unclouded" (as prominently put forth by movie posters promoting the cinematic release of *Princess Mononoke*, 1997).

Miyazaki's view that children perceive the world with greater awareness is reinforced by this tension between modern Japan and its mythic past. Many scenes in his films employ *ma* (lit. "space"), an aesthetic choice to highlight the gaps and spaces between moments. Observing Mei's encounter with the mythical Totoro or Kiki's triumph at the end of *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), both the mundane and the supermundane are amplified by their envelopment in short moments of silence and tranquility – as if to let the audience catch a deep breath to cherish the significance of the diegetic occasion even more. Everyday activities, such as cooking, do more than add realism; they shape global perceptions of Miyazaki films as wholesome or escapist.[3] These scenes, often from a child's perspective, turn mundane actions into quasi-mythical experiences, akin to encountering gods and spirits. Children transcend the disenchanted

[2] "People and trees used to be friends," the father in *My Neighbor Totoro* explains. His insights go beyond mere enchantment, as the movie constantly depicts the university researcher studying books about the Jōmon-period of Japan's pre-historical society of hunters and fishers, one of the many rejections of modernity and a noteworthy convergence with Miyazaki's complicated relation to his own cultural identity.

[3] Food in Ghibli films is a rabbit hole of online discourse in itself, with recipes and attempts at reproduction highly popular on platforms like YouTube or TikTok.

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
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adult view of the world, emphasizing the ability to savor the present without dwelling on the past or future. Crucially, Miyazaki's child characters possess the agency he felt lacking in his own wartime memories. Their distinct worldview, and the choices they make, resonate with the broader ecocritical themes of his work, where water often symbolizes various kinds of emotional and spiritual transformation, catalyzing growth and self-discovery for young characters.

Nourishment

At face value, water is integral to the bucolic and pastoral communities featured in Miyazaki's films. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, the eponymous valley, one of the last fertile areas in a post-cataclysmic world, is juxtaposed against the "ocean of salt." Here, water functions not just as a life-sustaining force but as a boundary marker between despair and hope. Nausicaä, the virtuous shōjo princess whose name echoes the nurturing figure from Homer's *Odyssey*, discovers that the Sea of Corruption – a miasmic expanse once thought to destroy life – actually protects and purifies, revealing fertile soil beneath. This revelation is made in the company of young Prince Asbel, signifying that humanity's survival hinges on a symbiotic relationship with nature, guided by youthful innocence and clarity. In this light, Nausicaä and Asbel are positioned as quasi-Adam and Eve figures, poised to lead a reimagined human civilization that acknowledges its ecological place among other life forms. Miyazaki's message is clear: the earth holds sufficient nourishment for those who approach it with respect and restraint, aligning with the Epicurean notion that "what's good is easy to get."

This theme of balanced sustenance permeates Miyazaki's oeuvre. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro's journey is marked by a notable struggle to find a sustainable relationship with food, oscillating between the extremes of gluttony and starvation. Early in the film, Chihiro's near-anorexic rejection of food stands in stark contrast to the gluttonous indulgence of her parents and the character No-Face, who embody unchecked consumerism and greed. It is only after Chihiro leaves the bathhouse – a metaphorical space for capitalist transactions and perhaps a reflection of Japan's complex relationship with its own commercialized traditions[4] – and finds refuge in Zeniba's tranquil forest hut, that she embraces a balanced and respectful connection to nourishment. This shift is not just about physical sustenance but reflects a deeper spiritual and emotional grounding. Water is a mundane but essential force that enables all creatures to share its offerings. Moreover, all beings occupy a similar ontological place in sustainable rapport with nature.

This is represented by water's function in Miyazaki's films as a portal to different layers of time, revealing the "foreign country" of the past. In *Ponyo*, the ocean is not just a setting but a link to the Devonian period, a time when life was simple, pure, and

[4] Since prostitution is technically prohibited, the ambiguously titled "soap lands" (sōpurando) which can be found in any major city, offer a way to circumvent restrictions for businessmen and sex tourists alike. This notion is explored in *Spirited Away*, where No-Face's seemingly supernatural productions of gold allow him to buy popularity with the majority of the bath house staff, whereas Chihiro decidedly rejects his efforts at buying her affection. Instead, she offers her sympathy, empathy, and community freely when she invites him to depart via the train.

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unburdened by human impact. The ocean, in this context, represents both the nurturing cradle of life and a repository for humanity's misdeeds, absorbing pollutants yet retaining its life-giving properties. This duality emphasizes the potential for renewal and the importance of approaching nature with reverence. As a mundane, ubiquitous element, water becomes a global connector – sustaining life across temporal boundaries and cultures, symbolizing a shared, universal need that transcends individual concerns.



The ocean as a primordial source of nourishment and destruction in Ponyo *(used with permission from Studio Ghibli)*

Miyazaki's portrayal of water as a nurturing force also draws from Western literary influences. In *Heidi* (1880) and *The Secret Garden* (1911), two books that Miyazaki read in his own childhood (Napier, 2008: 21), young protagonists find healing and growth through their connection to natural, water-rich environments. Frances Hodgson Burnett's narrative, in particular, pits a virtuous child against the backdrop of British colonial exploitation, with nature serving as a counterpoint to industrial greed.[5] Burnett's story, influenced by vitalistic notions about nature's energy to help humans overcome trauma and guilt, can be seen as a blueprint for the healing and nourishment that are emphasized in *My Neighbor Totoro*. Here, Miyazaki uses water and the lush countryside to create a nurturing backdrop for young Mei and Satsuki, whose experiences mirror their emotional and physical growth. Rain, rivers, and the verdant landscape defamiliarize the everyday, transforming it into a magical realm that resonates with the children's inner worlds. This aligns with Viktor Shklovsky's concept of "defamiliarization," where art makes the familiar strange to deepen the reader's/viewer's perception. Miyazaki's deliberate use of water elevates the ordinary to

[5] Anorexia can be traced throughout Edwardian children's literature, with Colin Craven's initial depiction as a sickly child determined to die in *The Secret Garden* an example from a key text. These depictions seem to hint at disruptions in progressing from childhood to adolescence and anxieties about the life that awaits as an adult.

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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the extraordinary, making it an essential element in the children's journeys of self-discovery and transformation.

In Miyazaki's films, water often transcends its basic physical properties to embody deeper emotional and spiritual significance. It acts as a catalyst for growth, a connector to the past, and a symbol of universal sustenance. Through their interactions with water, Miyazaki's young characters navigate the complexities of life, learning to balance their needs with those of the world around them. Whether as a gentle rain nourishing the earth or a vast ocean holding the secrets of time, water in Miyazaki's world is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of life, reflecting the director's vision of humanity's place within the natural order, with onto-taxonomic superiority or anthropocentrism rendered inherently illegitimate.

Reflection

The many portrayals of water in the director's movies frequently achieve several modes of reflection, both literal and metaphorical. Prominently, water serves as a mirroring surface that dissolves the boundaries between the endless blue skies traversed by fighter pilots in *Porco Rosso* (Kurenai no Buta, 1992) and *The Wind Rises*, and the expansive oceans that connect marine life and seafaring. This duality of reflection underscores a world where human aspirations and natural elements coexist in harmony, blurring the lines between reality and imagination. Characters in *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Castle in the Sky* gaze into smaller pools of water, seeing their own reflections and, in doing so, experiencing on a micro-level the defamiliarization that animation so revels in with its depictions of plausible, yet not necessarily historical or real worlds. Miyazaki uses these reflective surfaces to deepen his audience's connection with his characters, prompting them to reflect their inner selves, revealing fears, desires, and dreams.

In *Kiki's Delivery Service* (Majō no Takkyūbin, 1989), the quasi-Scandinavian idyll of Koriko, with its serene ocean view, draws Kiki to settle as the local witch. Her journey begins under the auspices of fate or coincidence, embodied in her nocturnal flight where she encounters an arrogant fellow witch who serves a town reminiscent of an amusement park – a simulacrum of real life, contained and superficial, that contrasts sharply with Miyazaki's celebrated depictions of authenticity and simplicity. It is a heavy downpour that reroutes Kiki's journey, leading her to the true destination she had unconsciously sought: a town with an ocean view, anchored by historical architecture and the soothing chime of church bells. The rain, merging the sky and the sea, here serves as a metaphor for the permeability of borders that so fascinates Miyazaki. Kiki's choice of Koriko is driven not only by its picturesque charm but by the sense of limitless possibility suggested by the convergence of endless sky and sea – a motif that the director's early works explore extensively.

The reflective relationship between water and sky permeates all early films, from the mythical floating island of Laputa in *Castle in the Sky* to the nurturing yet perilous environs of Nausicaä's valley. Laputa retreats into uncharted vertical space, crucially evoking the myth of Atlantis but remaining inaccessible and untainted by human utilitarianism. Similarly, Nausicaä's bucolic dwelling is located at an easily identifiable

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juncture when viewed from above, suggesting that human communities thrive where the boundaries between land, sky, and sea are fluid and uncontained. This merging of elements creates spaces of potential and discovery, where Miyazaki's characters, often children – certainly always at heart – find themselves and their place in the world.

These reflections resonate deeply within Miyazaki's diegetic worlds, permeated by a sense of longing that global audiences can respond to. He frequently speaks about nostalgia as a foundational sentiment, not confined to the adult experience but accessible even to children: "The word nostalgia comes to mind. Adults, fondly recalling something from their childhood, often speak of nostalgia. But even three-, four-, and five-year-olds feel a similar sentiment. It's something that all of us, regardless of age, actually experience." (*Starting Point*)

Alistair Swale links this pervasive nostalgia to the Japanese term *natsukashii*, which connotes a blend of remembrance and longing and transcends simple nostalgia for a bygone time (Swale, 2015). Miyazaki portrays nostalgia as a primordial state of being, innate from birth, and growing more profound with life's inevitable departures and farewells. This sentiment encapsulates the human condition, which is characterized by a feeling of being thrown into a world that predates and will outlast us, prompting even children to imagine other ages, places, or circumstances they might have preferred. The concept of *natsukashii* echoes the emotive principle of *furusato* – "my hometown" – a term frequently used in Japanese discourse, especially among those who have left their homes behind. The 1914 children's song, composed by Teiichi Okano, poignantly captures this sense of loss and longing:

I chased rabbits in those mountains
I caught small fish in that river
Those memories still bring dreams
Of my unforgettable hometown.
How are my father and mother doing?
Are my friends doing well?
Whenever it rains or winds blow,
I remember my hometown.
When I fulfill my ambitions
One day, I will return
To the green mountains of my hometown
To the clear waters of my hometown.

While *furusato* often denotes a specific place tied to one's identity and memories, Miyazaki reinterprets this concept through a broader aesthetic lens. In his films, *furusato* does not necessarily overlap with a character's birthplace or hometown but can be found in any place that evokes a deep, personal connection. In *Kiki's Delivery Service*, Kiki's attraction to Koriko represents a search for her true *furusato*, a place aligned with her aspirations and sense of self. Similarly, the parents of Mei and Satsuki are drawn to the natural dwelling around the camphor tree in *My Neighbor Totoro*, a setting that promises growth, healing, and a connection to the past. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, the titular character's bond with her environment goes beyond mere

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
Number: 1286882178

stewardship; it is a profound symbiosis that defines her identity and purpose. The Valley of the Wind, besieged by toxic jungles and remnants of a war-torn world, converges with Nausicaä's values and her role as a mediator between humanity and nature. Her *furusato* is not a tranquil refuge but a place that embodies her commitment to coexistence and harmony, even amid adversity.

Perhaps the most poetic reflection of *furusato* appears in *Spirited Away*, where Chihiro's journey through a mysterious world can be seen as a metaphorical return to a homeland she never knew she had. The spirit world is at once alien and intimately familiar, evoking a sense of belonging that transcends her initial fears. As she navigates this landscape, Chihiro builds connections with the spirits and discovers inner resilience, finding a sense of home and identity in, out of all possible places, this otherworldly setting. Miyazaki expands the idea of *furusato* beyond a physical or geographic place, presenting it as an internal state or spiritual condition.

A pivotal scene in *Spirited Away* captures this notion: during her flight back from Zeniba's cottage, Chihiro remembers a childhood incident where she fell into a river and was saved by an unseen force – a human hand disrupting the water's tranquility. This recollection allows her to reveal Haku's true name, freeing him from Yūbaba's spell. The scene encapsulates many of Miyazaki's signature motifs: the serenity of night flight, the beauty of entwined rivers below, and the convergence of memory, identity, and nature. It is in this reflective moment that Chihiro recognizes her place in both the spirit world and the human world she yearns to return to.

This scene not only reflects the essence of *furusato* but resonates with the Daoist concept of true names, where understanding an entity's true name reveals its essence and place in the cosmos. By recalling the river's name and thereby uncovering Haku's identity, Chihiro engages in a profound act of recognition that intertwines her personal history with the spirit world's metaphysical reality. The river, which once saved her, now serves as the key to her understanding of self and others, emphasizing the fluid nature of memory and identity. Water, in this context, once more transcends its physical properties to become a medium that bridges past and present, consciousness and the subconscious.

The reflective nature of water in this scene is essential – it mirrors the clarity of Chihiro's new understanding. As she flies over the tranquil waters, the surface acts as a metaphorical mirror, which reveals deeper truths about her identity and her connections to the world around her. The rivers and lakes below are not mere scenery; they symbolize the interconnectedness of all things, a concept central to Miyazaki's storytelling (and the Daoist worldview). As water adapts to its container, Chihiro's sense of self also is rendered fluid, evolving with the spiritual insights she uncovers.

This convergence of natural elements, personal history, and spiritual awakening encapsulates Miyazaki's broader aesthetic and philosophical project. In his films, *furusato* is not merely a nostalgic longing for a physical home but a journey toward self-discovery and harmony with the natural world. It represents a space where memories, landscapes, and spiritual encounters converge, revealing one's true place in the universe. From this perspective, Chihiro's journey becomes emblematic of a return not to a physical home but to a deeper understanding of her role within the broader

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
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tapestry of life, where the boundaries between self and environment, human and spirit, are fluid and ever-changing. Just like the water that reflects them so tangibly.



Water mirroring and extending the limitless sky in Spirited Away *(used with permission from Studio Ghibli)*

Rapport

If one were to pinpoint a scene from a Miyazaki movie that exemplifies how the director treats water, perhaps the most prominent example is found in *My Neighbor Totoro*. This scene, which has long become iconic, showcases the universal appeal of Miyazaki's works to both Eastern and Western audiences. In the scene, the protagonists, Satsuki and Mei, are waiting for their father at the bus stop when it begins to rain. Mei, perched on Satsuki's back, begins to doze off. Suddenly, the mythical creature Totoro appears beside them, confirming Mei's earlier account of encountering the forest spirit – a name she instinctively created from a mix of instinct and childish phonetics, as well as her reading of children's books about trolls. The appearance of Totoro coincides with the onset of rain, again illustrating how water serves as a bridge between the mundane and the mythical.

Here, the rain not only acts as a physical phenomenon but also as an invitation for the spiritual realm to intermingle with the human world. The same natural principle that causes the rain to fall also invites the curious Totoro to meddle with the two human children. Totoro's fascination with the natural world mirrors Mei's curiosity and playfulness about the troll-like being. As Totoro joyfully bounces up and down, causing Mei to awaken, the spirit's interaction with the environment is playful and spontaneous, devoid of the capitalist trappings of contemporary adult society. This interaction resonates with Schiller's concept of play, which he considers the highest form of human freedom and creativity – a liberated state where utilitarian and quotidian concerns are

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
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transcended (Schiller, 2004). In this moment, Totoro and Mei engage with their surroundings in a liberated manner that juxtaposes societal constraints, emphasizing a harmonious rapport with nature.

Miyazaki's exploration of water and its connection to childhood innocence is further highlighted in *Future Boy Conan* (Mirai Shōnen Konan, 1978), Miyazaki's directorial debut before Studio Ghibli's establishment. Set in the distant year 2008, the series, based on Alexander Key's novel *The Incredible Tide* (1970), opens with a striking montage of a nuclear apocalypse that engulfs the Earth in tidal waves, a stark depiction of humanity's self-destructive tendencies. The titular Conan and his grandfather, who live on a secluded island, are among the few survivors of this catastrophe. The anime's first episode immediately throws Conan into a battle with a shark, emphasizing his deep entanglement with the ocean and nature at large. Upon defeating the shark and resurfacing, Conan encounters Lana, a girl washed ashore who will soon draw him into a broader adventure.

Through Conan, Miyazaki portrays a post-apocalyptic world where the child protagonist embodies a rapport with nature that adults have lost. Conan's natural affinity with water and his agility contrast sharply with his grandfather's more reflective and resigned attitude. The boy's lack of awareness about the previous industrial world reflects his untamed spirit and untapped potential, highlighting a dissonance between the child's vibrant engagement with his environment and the stagnation of the adult mindset. His unrestrained interaction with water parallels the fluidity and dynamism of his character, forming a stark opposition to the opportunistic scheming of the adult world that has led to the world's post-cataclysmic state.

This theme of a profound, childlike connection to water and nature is further exemplified in *Spirited Away*. In the film, Chihiro's act of purifying the polluted river spirit embodies Miyazaki's recurring motif of water as a conduit for healing and spiritual awakening. The river spirit, initially appearing as a filthy, unrecognizable entity burdened by human waste, finds solace and redemption only through Chihiro's intervention. Despite her initial fear and disgust, Chihiro bravely cleanses the spirit, revealing its true form and restoring its dignity. This act underscores a broader environmental critique, highlighting the consequences of human negligence and the potential for redemption through empathy and respect for nature, a potential way out of the deep ecological conundrum of the Anthropocene. Children, as we have explored, are also apt inheritors for a new world that acknowledges the heterogenous structure of life, if the latter turns out to be too little, too late.

The river spirit's suffering and subsequent purification bear a resemblance to concepts found in various religious and philosophical traditions. In Shintoism, kami, or spirits, are often indifferent to human affairs, acting independently of human morality. Chihiro's actions vividly encapsulate this dual nature of the divine: both repellent in its suffering and irresistibly beautiful in its restored form. However, the river spirit's ordeal also notably resonates with Christian ideas of divine suffering within the human world. This notion is articulated by theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who famously posits that the divine suffers alongside creation, experiencing the world's pain (Moltmann, 1985). The river spirit's transformation, facilitated by Chihiro's compassion, reflects a synthesis of these spiritual perspectives – where divine presence is both transcendent and

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immanent, enduring human-inflicted suffering yet capable of renewal. While unexpected, water here serves as a connector between the divine and the human sphere and potential for redemption, but also highlights the rejection of a Platonic worldview where the two are separated around omnipotence and incompleteness respectively.

Water in Miyazaki's films frequently serves as a liminal space where the sacred and the mundane intersect. In *Ponyo*, the ocean is portrayed as a powerful and unpredictable force, nurturing yet potentially catastrophic. The film emphasizes the sea's numinous qualities, evoking a sense of awe that aligns with Otto's concept of the "mysterium tremendum" – an overwhelming presence that elicits both fear and fascination (Otto, 1923: 12-24). The tremendous divine here converges with the sublime experience enabled by water, once more emphasizing its ubiquity in the seemingly mundane. Similarly, in *Princess Mononoke*, the death of the Forest Spirit (shishigami) – a deity that embodies life, death, and rebirth – intensifies the numinous presence. As the god's blood spills into the rivers, turning them toxic, it signifies not just environmental degradation but the profound disruption of the sacred order. This scene vividly illustrates the consequences of humanity's disregard for the divine within nature – a direct link to Moltmann's perspective that human actions can cause the divine to suffer. The water, now a conduit of the Forest Spirit's pain, serves as a chilling reminder of the destructive potential that lies in severing the sacred ties between humanity and the natural world.

The culmination of these themes is found in *Spirited Away* when Chihiro recalls the river that once saved her, thus restoring Haku's true identity. This act of recognition, steeped in Daoist tradition, underscores the importance of true names and the intrinsic connection between identity and essence. Water here becomes a reflective medium, revealing not only Haku's true nature but also Chihiro's deep-seated connection to the spiritual world. It bridges past memories and present realities, embodying the fluidity of identity and the transformative power of recognition.

In Miyazaki's oeuvre, water symbolizes more than a mere backdrop; it is an active participant in the narrative, facilitating connections, transformations, and revelations. It serves as a metaphor for the fluidity of life, the interconnectedness of all beings, and the sacred ties between humanity and nature. Through water, Miyazaki invites audiences to explore the numinous – the divine presence that is at once familiar and awe-inspiring, reminding us of the delicate balance that sustains the world and our place within it. This interplay of water, divine suffering, and the numinous reaches its pinnacle in the moment Chihiro recalls the river that saved her as a child, thereby restoring Haku's true identity. It is through water that these revelations occur, underscoring its role as a medium of connection, transformation, and reflection of the numinous in Miyazaki's worlds.

By threading these elements together, Miyazaki's films do more than depict divine suffering; they explore the numinous as a complex, multifaceted presence that invites both reverence and reflection. Water, as a symbol and a medium, crystallizes this interplay between the divine and the mundane, revealing how humanity's relationship with the sacred is both fragile and profoundly significant. In doing so, Miyazaki not only captures the fearsome beauty of the numinous but also challenges viewers to recognize the divine in the world around them, in all its wondrous and terrifying forms.

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ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
Number: 1286882178



Water washing away the border between the mundane and the mythical. (Used with permission from Studio Ghibli)

Conclusion: Water as Constitutive of Miyazaki's Deep Ecology

Hayao Miyazaki's works have increasingly been recognized for their profound ecological themes, which transcend simple environmental messages to explore deeper philosophical questions about humanity's place within the natural world. Initially somewhat overlooked in Western academic discourse, Miyazaki's films are now celebrated as "nature narratives for children" (Thevenin, 2013) and as a significant voice in environmental ethics (Donsomsakulkij, 2015). Central to this ecological vision is what Susan Napier describes as "de-assurance" – a perspective that emphasizes the intricate and often indiscernible web of relationships between humans and nature, eschewing simplistic binaries of good and evil, and instead portraying a world where all beings coexist as ontologically equal entities:

> In Ashitaka and San's agreement to live apart, the film suggests the pain involved in choosing identities in a world in which choices such as theirs are increasing. Although set in a historical past, the film reflects the extraordinary array of pluralities that exist in the complex world of the twenty-first century. (Napier, 2001: 490)

This is indeed vividly depicted in *Princess Mononoke*, where the clash between human and natural realms does not paint clear heroes or villains, but rather highlights the complexities of coexistence and the difficult choices that define our identities and relationships with the world.

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Miyazaki's environmental philosophy aligns closely with the object-oriented ontology branch of philosophy that critiques the hierarchical categorization of entities based on perceived importance. This philosophical approach rejects both the reduction of objects to mere aggregates of their parts and the dismissal of their intrinsic value based on their effects on other entities (Harman, 2011). Water, in Miyazaki's narratives, exemplifies this viewpoint, serving not merely as a resource or setting, but as a vibrant, autonomous entity with agency that significantly influences the characters and their journeys. It symbolizes transformation and connection, bridging worlds and acting as a medium for spiritual and personal growth. The juvenile protagonists' interactions with water reflect their unique capacity to engage with the world in ways unburdened by adult preconceptions, often leading to moments of profound insight and connection.

Water thus serves as a dynamic character in Miyazaki's films – an active participant in the ecological and narrative fabric that shapes the protagonists' experiences. It encapsulates the duality of nature, being both nurturing and destructive, and challenges the human characters to navigate their fears, hopes, and responsibilities within this intricate web of life. By portraying water in this multifaceted way, Miyazaki's films resonate with ecocritical calls to acknowledge the agency of all entities, enriching the narrative with a deeper ecological consciousness. This serves a didactic purpose, as this approach encourages viewers, especially younger audiences, to perceive the natural world not as a backdrop for human action, but as a complex network where every element, from rivers and oceans to the smallest raindrop, plays an integral role.

As this analysis has shown, water is not merely a passive element but a force that interacts with human intentions and actions, reflecting the broader ecological and existential themes at play. This vivid portrayal aligns with Jane Bennett's assertion that

> humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore. (Bennett, 2010: 31)

The inseparability of human and nonhuman forces in shaping the world are at the forefront of many of the movies discussed here. Water in Miyazaki's universe symbolizes interconnectedness, acting as a vibrant force that challenges human characters to reconsider their place in the ecosystem. Water is thus both one of the non-forces that act out of causal networks largely shrouded in uncertainty (part of what Napier considers de-assuring), and a vibrant material presence that exerts its own agency within these networks.

Interestingly, all three central points of this investigation are interlinked. One, children can perceive the world without the constraints of the mundaneness of the adult world. Two, the world they find themselves thrown into awards this heightened perception by confronting them with an ever-complex network of seldomly glimpsed interrelations (the true function of the sea of decay in *Nausicaä*, the ocean as a chronicle of bygone planetary life in *Ponyo* etc.). Three, water is particularly ominous, as it nourishes, reflects, and enables engagement for human characters at various occasions. Miyazaki widely stays loyal to this foundational complexity and ambiguity, as there is beauty in destruction and ruin, regardless of whether it is caused by natural forces or the hands of culture.

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Miyazaki's latest film, *The Boy and the Heron* (kimitacho ha dou ikiru ka?, 2023), further deepens this exploration by revisiting and expanding upon these themes through the lens of water as a liminal space between life and death, reality and fantasy. The film presents water not only as a physical element but as a boundary between worlds – a mirror reflecting the protagonist's internal struggles and the mysteries of existence. Once more, the movie also connects the real trauma of war with the supermundane, tied together by a setting that both reflects and invites its underaged protagonist. As an initially enigmatic guide, the heron leads the boy through landscapes shaped by water, where the fluidity of life and death is ubiquitous and constantly emphasized. In these sequences, water acts as both a medium of revelation and a force that must be navigated with care and respect. This narrative choice underscores the idea that water is not merely a passive backdrop but a dynamic and living force that plays a crucial role in the journey of self-discovery. This self-discovery leads not only to other planes of existence in supernatural terms, but – in a similar way to *Spirited Away*'s placid and reflective seascape – a journey into a personal past that has been lost. The two movies are linked both stylistically and philosophically.

Ultimately, Miyazaki's treatment of water intertwines with his broader thematic explorations. Children, through their unfiltered perception, are attuned to the world's complexities in ways that adults often overlook. By maintaining a narrative complexity and ambiguity, Miyazaki captures the beauty inherent in both creation and destruction, illustrating a worldview where the sacred and the mundane, the natural and the human, are inextricably linked. *The Boy and the Heron* encapsulates this vision, at is presents water as a metaphor for the fluidity of existence and the interconnectedness of all life and demonstrates Miyazaki's acknowledgement of water and children as linked by liminality, malleability, and underappreciated profundity. For a country that faces a teenage suicide rate of unprecedented scope (Ishikawa, 2023), the sublime link of children imbued in the natural world, reflected and nourished not least by water, along with Miyazaki's ubiquitous plea to "live!" ("*ikite!*"), becomes a poignant reminder of the deep ecological connections that sustain life. This synthesis of philosophical thought and narrative art forms a cornerstone of Miyazaki's deep ecology and challenges global audiences to recognize the profound significance of all elements of nature in their shared existence.

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Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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Journal of Children in Popular Culture, Volume 14, Issue 1, Fall 2024
Copyright © 2022 Journal of Children in Popular Culture - All Rights Reserved.
Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X OCLC
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