

The Dharma of MIYAZAKI Hayao: Revenge vs. Compassion in *Nausicaa* and *Mononoke*

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Miyazaki Hayao, the master of Japanese *anime*, has said that he makes his films only to entertain (89-90¹). For those of us who love his films, however, there is much more to say, not only about why they are so enjoyable but why they are so emotionally involving... so *mythic*. Miyazaki's best *anime* are much more than entertainment. In order to live, we need air, water, food, clothes and shelter — and we also need stories, because stories teach us what is important about life. They give us models of how to live in a complicated and often confusing world. In the post/modern world, where traditional religious stories have become less important for most people, storytellers like Miyazaki offer us new myths — important ones, since the commercial success of his films means they offer a very visible alternative to the “lowest common denominator” that marketplace commodification otherwise tends to encourage.

We do not understand Miyazaki's films unless we look at his work in this light, for they address better than any other *anime* our need for more positive myths about meaning and models of how to live. For example, he has often focused on the challenges for girls growing up in contemporary Japan, depicting young female protagonists in ways that work to give adolescent girls confidence about themselves, empowering them in a culture that remains very patriarchal. This is an important theme in many of his films:

Kaze no Tani no Nausicaa (Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds, 1984), *Tonari no Totoro* (My Neighbor Totoro, 1988), *Majo no Takkyubin* (Kiki's Delivery Service, 1989), *Omoide Poro Poro* (Only Yesterday, 1991), *Mimi o Sumaseba* (Whispers of the Heart, 1995), *Mononoke Hime* (Princess Mononoke, 1997), *Sen to Chihiro no Kami Kakushi* (Spirited Away, 2001), etc.

This short essay, however, will focus on another aspect of Miyazaki's films: their spiritual dimension, which is quite striking in his best films despite the fact that overtly religious images and references are not usually important. Instead, his deepest spiritual concerns are fully assimilated into the plots as central themes. One of the reasons this works so well is because in Miyazaki's films the spiritual is understood in an imminent way, as integrated into the natural world rather than being some monotheistic transcendental being or force. Here we will try to make this point with reference to what we find to be his two most interesting films, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds* and *Princess Mononoke*. In particular, the focus is on what these mythic films say — or rather, show -- about the problem of evil and violence, and how to respond to it. Needless to say, this is always a topical issue, and now more than ever, unfortunately.

These two films need to be appreciated in relation to each other, because the parallels between

them are quite striking. Both focus on young princesses. Both gain a mythic perspective on the present by being set in historically distant times. *Nausicaa* is located in a post-apocalyptic future after ecological and social disaster has destroyed technological civilization and poisoned much of the natural world. Miyazaki says this was inspired by the mercury poisoning of Minamata Bay, “which sent shivers up my spine” (74). *Mononoke* is set in pre-historical Japan, where ecological destruction is just beginning, as some human societies are learning to cut down the primeval forest in order to forge iron. Both films present imaginative, detailed animal worlds where “the right of every living thing to cling to life is unquestioned; Miyazaki said that *Nausicaa* itself ‘was inspired by a kind of animism’ (78)” – something obviously true for *Mononoke* also. In contemporary terms, Miyazaki’s world is that of a deep ecologist. The natural-world context for these two films offers an interesting contrast to some of his other films, which gain much of their attraction from how well they depict ordinary life today in urban Japan.

Traditional religion plays no significant role in either film, despite the presence of two old woman oracles. The only role of Lady Hii is to banish Ashitaka from his village at the beginning of *Mononoke*; Nausicaa’s grandmother is a seer who tells her the prophecy of the valley’s savior and at the end of the film declares that Nausicaa has fulfilled it. Both films are striking, from a Western perspective at least, in that the relationships between humans and the gods, and between humans and nature, are really the same; the spiritual and the natural are nondual. Given the double-sided threat in both films – the human threat to the natural world, and nature’s threat to human society -- there is an obvious ecological focus, but that *horizontal axis* between humans and nature must be balanced by another vertical axis, at least as important, between hatred/violence/evil and selfless compassion. *Both storylines are motivated by hatred and revenge, which rationalizes the violence of one group against another. Both plots focus on challenging what has been called “the myth of redemptive violence,” the all-too-common assumption that violence is the proper way to resolve certain types of conflict; and both powerfully depict an alternative.* That is why they are so cathartic, so mythic.

Both films avoid the simple duality between good (“us”) and evil (“them”) – a good group defending itself against the evil threat of an outside group – by triangulating. Each film shows us three societies, presented against the backdrop of a threatened and threatening nature. In both cases one of those societies is a peace-loving backwater, which provides the protagonist (*Nausicaa* and *Ashitaka*), who takes it upon herself/himself to mediate and try to stop a war between the other, more aggressive groups.

Nausicaa’s small village in the Valley of the Winds is contrasted with the much more powerful Tolmekia, whose leader Kushana wants control of an extraordinarily powerful weapon, a God Warrior, to destroy the poisoned forest; Kushana also seeks revenge on the Ohmu-creatures who have maimed her. The other society is Pejitei, whose God Warrior has been stolen by Kushana, and whose Prince Asbel is also motivated by revenge – in his case, against the Tolmekians

responsible for the death of his sister in an air crash. Later the Pejiteans plot revenge against the Tolmekians after their land has been destroyed by the Tolmekians and the Ohmu.

Nausicaa is rather too perfect as a noble-minded heroine, although she is not a one-dimensional cardboard figure. She flies into a rage when the Tolmekians kill her father King Jhil, but she is restrained by her mentor, the wise swordsman Yupa, and is able to let-go of, grow beyond, her desire for revenge. The main contrast of the film is between almost everyone else's resentment and her own self-sacrificing compassion for everyone so blindly caught up in their own violence. She constantly risks herself to stop the killing: to quiet her own people when they want to fight after hearing about her father's death; on a Tolmekian ship attacked by Asbel; approaching a Pejitean ship carrying a baby Ohmu; and in the climax, to stop the crazed attack of the swarming giant Ohmu. Her spiritual martyrdom and resurrection provide a pointed contrast with other *anime* (and other action films) where the hero also risks himself — but to kill the baddies.

It is important to notice that none of the societies or their leaders in *Nausicaa* is presented as “evil.” Rather, each of the three different groups is trying to do the best it can, within its own worldview and limited understanding. The same is true for nature. The Ohmu, as representatives of the natural world, are depicted affectionately: their instinctive reactions to events are also limited by their lack of understanding, but they are not patronized as sub-human monsters. Quite the contrary.

When Nausicaa crash-lands in the Badlands, she has an epiphany as she discovers that the poisoned forest, instead of trying to poison the rest of the world, is in fact slowly working to purify itself of the pollutants created by humans. In one of the most memorable scenes (with haunting music), she has a visionary dream in which she remembers an incident from her childhood, when she tried to protect a baby Ohmu. The Ohmu have magical healing powers, and throughout the film nature is depicted in a mysterious, mystical way that is to be respected rather than understood. The natural world is spiritual, and by communing with it we can be healed.

Change a few names, and almost all the above is also true for *Princess Mononoke*, which inspires us to think of it as practically a remake of the earlier film, as if Miyazaki were thinking through the same themes again, deepening and enriching them. The first time we saw *Mononoke*, however, with our expectations high after all the PR hype, we were somewhat disappointed.

The reason for our initial hesitation, we later realized, was confusion due to the way that Miyazaki frustrates our expectations about who the good guys and the bad guys are supposed to be. Again, and even more clearly, the plot refuses to make any simple duality between good and evil. In this film too most people do bad things, not because their nature is evil, but because they are complicated -- sometimes because they are greedy or otherwise selfish, sometimes because

they are defending *their own group*. Another way to put it is that they are so narrowly focused on what they are doing that they do not see the wider implications of their actions.

In *Mononoke* the nonviolent-mediator-from-a-backwater is a young man who intervenes in the war between Lady Eboshi, ruler of Irontown, and San, an abandoned child who has been raised by the giant wolf-god Moro and hates her own kind. Both women are depicted as attractive, even admirable figures – but they want to destroy each other. Eboshi doesn't mind cutting down the forest to make iron, “trying to build her idea of paradise – which makes her a twentieth-century person” (Miyazaki, 193). For her the end justifies the means, but she is also shown as a strong feminist who is compassionate to the lepers and former prostitutes in her care. San identifies with the forest and the animals who dwell in it, and she tries to defend them against the encroachments of Irontown. Like Nausicaa interceding between Tolmekia and Pejitei, Ashitaka risks his own life trying to stop the violence between Eboshi and San, and later between their groups.

Similar to the giant Ohmu in *Nausicaa*, Shishi/Didaribotchi – the God of the forest – has a numinosity that is not transcendent but imminent in nature, with a mystical healing power that humans can participate in and benefit from. Here, too, *Mononoke* is more nuanced: the God of the forest grants life, but he also takes it away. Ashitaka, like Nausicaa, has a spiritual epiphany in the depths of the forest near a magical pond surrounded by towering trees, when Shishi/Didaribotchi heals him of a wound.

The gods are not immortal: they can become diminished, even be killed, which is what is happening as humans begin to destroy their forest home. The climax of both films is a ferocious battle, which begins with an angry charge by animals who have been provoked by humans. Nausicaa and Ashitaka try to stop the battles; Nausicaa is successful, Ashitaka is not. In both cases the greater intelligence of humans does not imply any moral superiority, since their intelligence is used in a mean-spirited way to instigate aggression and bloodshed.

Again, the finale involves resurrection – in this case, though, experienced not by our hero but by Didaribotchi himself, whose head has been shot off by Lady Eboshi. Despite human deception and this act of deicide, nature is not romanticized as good, humans as evil. Nature can be stupid and wrathful, as we see in the suicidal rage of the Overlord of the boars, and especially at the end when the life-force of the decapitated Didaribotchi becomes a death-force that destroys everything it touches, a powerful symbol for the destructiveness of Nature when damaged by human greed.

In the end, the forest God's head is restored, but “there can be no happy ending to the war between gods and mortals” (203). Nausicaa does have a happy ending: as the Ohmu retreat the three different human tribes are no longer fighting each other, and the fact that nature is slowly

purifying itself of its poisons gives hope for the future. In *Mononoke*, however, there is no possibility of restoring ecological harmony between nature and humans; the film ends with an uneasy truce, everyone picking up the pieces. Too many have died in the ferocious battles, too much has been destroyed. The survivors of Irontown will rebuild under Eboshi's guidance. "Ashitaka and San meet again in the grasslands at the edge of the forest. He will never be able to go back to the innocent boy he was before the curse, but he has kept innocence and gentleness alive in his heart through all the deceit and disappointment he has faced. San will never trust humans and does not want to live in a human community, but she has learned that she loves Ashitaka and wants to be with him as much as possible. They have time to work things out" (199). For them, at least, their love is redemptive.

Like *Nausicaa*, *Mononoke* is an antiwar film, but the depiction of violence in the later film is more painful and nuanced. Nonviolent purity is no longer so simple. Nausicaa stops a war, but Ashitaka cannot. Now violence is not so easy to escape. At the beginning of *Nausicaa*, our heroine is able to calm a crazed Ohmu who is attacking Yupa. At the beginning of *Mononoke*, Ashitaka tries to calm a crazed boar-god who is attacking his village, but in this case unsuccessfully, so he has to kill it. Ashitaka himself is cursed by this act, and it does not help that his wound was earned in defense of his own people. His crazed victim (itself poisoned by an iron pellet, from an earlier act of violence) has given him a wound that will eat away at him until it kills him. In the meantime, however, Ashitaka's curse encourages him and enables him to kill more — all this a poignant metaphor for the addictive cycle of reciprocal violence, passed down from one victim to another.

All the main characters are scarred by their own violence, but the nastiest person in *Mononoke* turns out to be Jiko, a disarmingly charming itinerant priest and secret agent for the unseen Emperor, who wants the head of the Forest God because he has heard it can grant immortality. Jiko is willing to betray Irontown and evidently anyone else to get what he wants — again, the ends justifies the means — but he is not shown as "evil," just as selfish and indifferent to the consequences of his actions for others. Others kill and deceive to promote their own group interests, he does it to promote his own interest; so he is not really much different from anyone else, and the film ends with his disarming comment on his failure to get the God's head: *Hyaa, maitta maitta, bakaniwa katen* ("Well, well, you just can't outwit such folk").

This complicated and subtle plot begs to be contrasted with the usual sort of *anime* story — for example, Disney's *Lion King*, which was shown in cinemas about the same time. *The Lion King* contrasts the noble ruler of the animals, his loving wife and their innocent cub Simba, all good of course, with Simba's evil uncle. The evil uncle hatches a plot to kill the king and eliminate Simba, who escapes but eventually returns to fight the uncle, etc. All very predictable, although often beautiful visually.

The basic problem with such plots is that, although they are repetitious to the point of boredom, we nevertheless tend to love them, because this struggle between good (those we identify with) and evil (the “other”) is so comfortable, so satisfying. The “myth of redemptive violence” is extraordinarily attractive – indeed, usually irresistible -- because it is such a simple way to make sense of our messy world. Think of the plot of every James Bond film, every Star Wars film, every Indiana Jones film, every Terminator film, and now every Harry Potter film, etc. The bad guys are caricatures: ruthless, maniacal, without remorse, they must be stopped by any means necessary. We are meant to feel that it is okay – and to tell the truth, it's quite pleasurable – to see violence inflicted upon them. Because the villains like to hurt people, it's okay to hurt them. Because they like to kill people, it is okay to kill them. After all, they are evil and evil must be destroyed.

What is this kind of story really teaching us? That if you want to hurt someone, it is important to demonize them first: that is, to fit them into your good-vs.-evil script. So even school bullies usually begin by looking for some petty offense (often a perceived insult) that they can use to justify their own violence. That is why the first casualty of all wars is truth: the media must “sell” this script to the people.

In contrast, the central problem in both *Nausicaa* and *Mononoke* is not evil but what Buddhism calls the three roots of evil, also known as the three poisons: greed, ill will and delusion -- especially the delusion of a self (whether individual ego or collective “wego”) whose interests are promoted at the cost of the “not-self,” of whatever is outside oneself and therefore can be used as means to one's own ends. That the underlying problem is with *self* becomes clear when we ask: who or what does each person identify with? Violence occurs because the benefits for one's own group are pursued at the cost of other groups, but *Nausicaa* and *Ashitaka* refuse to play that game. Because they identify with everyone, including the animals who inhabit the natural world, they refuse to destroy or exploit any group for the sake of another. This frees them from the narrow-minded resentment and tendency towards violence that the others express. They show us another way to live.

According to Buddhism, if we want to overcome our suffering then our greed, ill will and delusion must transform into generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom. Both *Nausicaa* and *Ashitaka* embody such a transformation, but we can say a bit more about this alternative. We conclude with a few reflections on the other mode of being they exemplify.

In place of our usual good-versus-evil duality, both films point toward a more insightful distinction between two basic modes of *being in the world*, two different ways of responding to the insecurity of our life in the world. One mode involves trying to control and fixate the world we are in, so that it becomes less threatening and more amenable to our will. The Pejitean ruler Kushana in *Nausicaa* and Lady Eboshi in *Mononoke* are classic examples of this, although this

also applies to many other characters in both films.

The other mode involves a very different strategy, opening ourselves up to the world in a way that does not allow our concern for *controlling* the world to dominate the way we *respond* to the world.

Both of these ways of living involve a quest for security, but they seek that security in different ways, because they understand the nature and source of security differently. *Security* is from the Latin *se + cura*, literally “without care” – that is, the condition where we can live without care, when our lives are not preoccupied with worrying about our lives. We can try to achieve such a condition by completely controlling our world, as Kushana and Eboshi try to do, yet there are other ways to be “without care,” which involve a greater trust or faith in the world itself. The first way is more dualistic: we try to manipulate the world in order to fixate our situation and identity. The second way is more nondual: greater openness to the world is possible because it is perceived as less threatening and more welcoming, so our own boundaries can be more permeable. In both *Nausicaa* and *Mononoke* such openness is encouraged because the natural world is depicted as spiritual, welcoming and healing those humans who enter it gently with respect.

The irony is that both modes of being involve reinforcing feedback systems that tend to incorporate others. When we manipulate the world to get what we want from it, the more separate and alienated we feel from it, and the more separate others feel from us, of course, when they have been manipulated; this mutual distrust encourages both sides to manipulate more. On the other side, the more we can relax and open up to the world, trusting in it, the more we feel a part of it, at one with other people; and the more others become inclined to trust and open up to us. Both feedback loops are exemplified in both films: there are plenty of examples of exploitation leading to resentment and violence, and, on the other side, the way that Nausicaa and Ashitaka try to mediate the conflicts gradually wins the confidence of the combatants on both sides.

The best terms that we can think of for these two modes of being are *fear* and *love*. If these are indeed the two most basic modes of living in the world, the choice between them, or proportion between them, is the basic challenge that confronts each of us as we mature. This choice is nothing new to psychologists, of course, and a contemporary psychotherapist, Mel Schwartz, has expressed it better than we can:

Contrary to what we may believe there are only two authentic core emotions; they are love and fear. Other emotions are secondary and are typically masks for fear. Of these, anger is very common. Although we may have come to regard anger as a source emotion, it is really a smokescreen for fear. When we look at our anger, we can always find fear buried beneath it. In our culture we are trained to believe that it's unwise to show fear. We erroneously

believe that expressing such vulnerability will permit others to take advantage of us. Yet the fear is there nonetheless.²

Understanding anger as a mask for fear helps us to understand both films, for fear — of nature, of other groups — is a constant undercurrent. The protagonists display plenty of greed, ill-will and delusion, but it is not difficult to detect the fear that underlies them. *Nausicaa's* storyline is driven by Kushana, who steals a fearsome God-Warrior to help her destroy the poisoned forest of fungus before it contaminates the whole earth. Fear of what the poisoned forest is doing fuels the inter-group greed and resentment that Nausicaa refuses to get caught up in.

In *Princess Mononoke* the major conflict is between two powerful women who want to kill each other, because *each fears what the other side is trying to do to them*. As always, one's own violence is justified because it is understood as defensive, but, as usual, the hatred and aggression of each becomes a mirror-image of the other. During the climactic violent battle between them, a samurai warlord also attacks Irontown, encouraged by the Emperor, who craves the head of Didaribotchi because a legend says that the forest God's head can confer immortality. This last motivation is not much developed in the film, although it reminds us of our greatest fear, perhaps the one that interferes most with our ability to be open to the world.

How much better it would be, for example, if the Israel-Palestine conflict were understood in these terms! Not as a holy war between good and evil, but as a tragic cycle of reciprocal violence and hatred fuelled by escalating fear on both sides. Israelis fear that they will never be able to live at peace, believing that Palestinians are determined to destroy them. Palestinians, impoverished by Israeli control over their own communities and dominated by its U.S.-supplied military, also fear that they will never be able to live at peace, and so they strike back in the only way they can.

How does one break out of such a cycle of violent retaliation? It is necessary to find ways to address the fear in the heart of the other, but first we must address the violence in our own hearts, in order to “resist not evil” in the sense of not requiting violence with violence. This does not mean passivity but the type of selfless courage that is not afraid to risk oneself. The classic religious examples are Christ on the cross (“Forgive them, for they know not what they do”) and Shakyamuni Buddha, both emphasizing the “ancient law” that hatred is never overcome by hatred. If *anime* characters are not quite in the same league, Miyazaki nevertheless brings to life for us two other examples, which is why these superb films are not only wonderfully entertaining but spiritually insightful.

¹ All page references are to Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1999).

² We have been unable to trace the source of this quotation, which was included in an email we received.

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