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Rethinking Human-Nature Relationships in the Time of Coronavirus: Postmodern Animism in Films by Miyazaki Hayao & Shinkai Makoto

Shoko Yoneyama

Abstract: *Issues we are confronted with in the age of the Anthropocene, such as climate change, extinction, and the coronavirus pandemic demand a fundamental rethink of human-nature relationships, but at the same time we are faced with a ‘crisis of imagination’, which is highlighted by the paucity of stories or narratives that enable us to fully engage with these issues. We have a ‘climate crisis’ as well as a ‘crisis of culture’ and both derive from the same source: epistemological limitations in the paradigm of modernity. The most problematic limitation is the fact that our social scientific knowledge has blind spots when it comes to nature and spirituality which makes it almost impossible for us to rethink human-nature relationships in a meaningful way. Miyazaki Hayao and Shinkai Makoto, however, directly illuminate these blind spots by making nature and spirituality central features in their animation films. This opens up new epistemological and ontological spaces in the hearts and minds of a global audience, making it possible to imagine something new. And that ‘something new’ is ‘postmodern animism’ which emerged from the fusion of a critique of modernity with the intangible cultural heritage of grassroots Japan. Postmodern animism is a philosophy that sees nature as a combination of the life-world and the spiritual-world thus enabling us to engage with climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic in a radically different way. It helps us to conceive a new paradigm that is more suitable for the Anthropocene.*

Key words: *coronavirus, COVID-19, climate change, Anthropocene, animism, postmodern animism, nature, spirituality, human-nature relationship, Miyazaki Hayao, Studio Ghibli, Shinkai Makoto, life-world, spiritual-world, Tenki no Ko, Weathering with You*

1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps around the world, it is not hard to predict that ‘there is going to be a quite radical rethinking about our way of life’.¹ The longer this crisis lasts, the deeper this rethink will be. But how deep, should or could it go? For example, the need to rethink human-nature relationships has been felt widely for some time in the context of climate change. Some even say that the coronavirus crisis ‘will give us the jolt we seem to need to start behaving and thinking in a different way’.² But again, how deep, should or could this rethink go?

In *The Great Derangement: The Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh suggests that it is hard to address climate change outside science because the climate crisis entails a ‘crisis of imagination’ plus a ‘crisis of culture’.³ We do not have stories that enable us to fully engage the crisis, Ghosh argues, because both the climate crisis and literary fiction derive from the existing modern paradigm which is based on the enlightenment.

Although Ghosh presents detailed analysis of different genres of stories, the issue is probably not so much about the actual genre but is more about the fundamental epistemological limitations that cut across stories of all genres. Whether it is literary fiction, sci-fi, fantasy, or a disaster story (including climate fiction or ‘cli-fi’), an *epistemology of a human-nature relationship that is different from the one we now have is rarely presented in the context of everyday life in our contemporary society*. In other words, stories of climate change are rarely told with a sense of the ‘here and now’, while at the same time providing epistemology other than modernity,⁴ namely, anthropocentrism based on the human-nature dichotomy.

It is in this context that I see the significance of the works of Miyazaki Hayao and Shinkai Makoto, two renowned animation film directors from Japan who have enormous global influence. Although their films may appear to be ‘fantasy’, using the medium of animation to present images of the unseen world as well as the super-human powers of their protagonists, their stories often address the *seriousness of every-day life struggles*. This makes it difficult for their stories to be dismissed as purely ‘fantasy’ (this will be discussed more later). More importantly, I argue that their works play a significant role in the Anthropocene, which is inundated with existential threats such as climate change, extinction, and the threat of further zoonotic pandemics. Their works are important because, I argue, they provide **a cultural frame of reference** that helps us imagine a new kind of human-nature relationship.

A need to rethink human-nature relationships has been recognised since the 1990s by social scientists such as Latour, Haraway, and Descola.⁵ More recently, even the Vatican publicly announced a need to re-interpret biblical human-nature relationships.⁶ This, however, is not an easy thing to do. As

Plumwood points out, human-nature dualism is a ‘western-based cultural formation going back thousands of years’,⁷ which conceives that *the human is superior to non-human* because the human essence is thought to be ‘the higher disembodied element of mind, reason, culture and soul or spirit’,⁸ which gives justification to use non-human (i.e. nature) as a mere resource or instrument for humans: this is anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism increased during the Enlightenment, which further elevated the position of humans as the users of science which enabled us to control nature for our benefit, a trend which is even more pronounced in modernity through industrialisation and the advancement of technology. As a consequence, we now live in the Anthropocene (the ‘age of humans’), a geological age in which the planetary impact of humans is recognised. It is even predicted that some humans who control our meta-data will soon be ‘Homo Deus’ (‘human god’).⁹ Even within social science, the rethinking of human-nature relationships has been dominated by the ‘culturalisation of nature’ where “natures” are seen as the outcome of human agency, or of a hybrid form of agency’,¹⁰ suggesting that the human-nature divide has been rethought to remove the dichotomy, but in a way that augments anthropocentrism.¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic is defying the arrogance of anthropocentrism. Sooner or later, the virus will be controlled as a vaccine or effective treatments become available. But we are now experiencing an *overwhelming sense of uncanniness* that has engulfed the *entire* human society. In the midst of the Anthropocene, an unexpected ‘Anthropause’ has occurred: a global slowing of modern human activities:¹² when not just the virus but also ‘nature’ is suddenly present in surprising ways -- a kangaroo appearing in the CBD of Adelaide, mountain goats roaming the streets of Llandudno in Wales, wild boars trotting around the city of Haifa, etc.¹³ Ghosh suggests that this *sense of uncanniness* has been present

with climate change for some time. He writes:

No other word [but uncanny] comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes [associated with climate change] are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, *the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors* (emphasis added).¹⁴

He writes that: ‘we have now entered a time where wild has become the norm’;¹⁵ ‘nonhuman forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought’;¹⁶ and ‘one of the uncanniest effects of the Anthropocene [is] this renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself’.¹⁷

But again, do we have stories that enable us to imagine the different epistemology and ontology needed to rethink human-nature relationships (or more precisely, anthropocentrism) in order to respond to the sense of wonder that comes with the COVID-19 pandemic, or the ‘Anthropause’— an uncanny yet powerful sense of wonder such as that captured in a song composed during the pandemic, being inspired by Rachel Carson: ‘Nature Came to Me’?¹⁸

My argument is this: Miyazaki Hayao and Shinkai Makoto provide stories that are significant at this historical juncture because they provide a cultural frame of reference that presents epistemology based on a different notion of human-nature relationships. They do this by centering nature and the spiritual world at the core of their work. As I argued in my book, ***Animism in Contemporary Japan: Voices for the Anthropocene from Post-Fukushima Japan*** (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0367582627/?tag>

=theasipacjo0b-20) (Routledge 2019), nature and spirituality constitute two blind spots of our modern paradigm, the fundamental way the world is perceived and understood in the knowledge-base of social sciences, or more broadly, the west.¹⁹ In other words, nature and spirituality are precisely the concepts that need to be reconsidered when we rethink human-nature relationships in order to engage the Anthropocene, climate change, and the zoonotic pandemic.

Our conceptualisation of spirituality is the key here as it is the hallmark of humanity that places us next to god and above nature in western civilisation. Precisely because of that, within western ontology, it is difficult to imagine something radically different in the endeavor to rethink human-nature relationships. Miyazaki and Shinkai help us to take the first step, to imagine something totally different, a different epistemology and ontology, because they not only address the question of nature and spirituality but also visualize and give actual images of the unseen world, that reach millions of people around the world.

With this thesis in mind, let me discuss their work more closely, first Shinkai’s, then Miyazaki’s. Special attention is paid to Shinkai’s 2019 film, *Weathering with You*, as it directly addresses climate change and the Anthropocene. This work will be contextualized with reference to Miyazaki’s work which presents a more robust philosophical foundation on the topic of human-nature relationships, more specifically, (postmodern) animism.

2. The Anthropocene and *Weathering with you*

Climate change manifests mostly as abnormal and often destructive weather patterns. *Weathering with You* (*Tenki no Ko* 天気の子,

literally, *Children of Weather*) directed by Shinkai Makoto is the first animation feature film to have climate change and the Anthropocene as its main theme. The film was released in Japan in July 2019 and became a ‘mega hit’ with box-office revenues exceeding 13 billion yen in the first 10 weeks.²⁰ It has also been released in many other parts of the world, 140 countries in total.²¹

The use of the word ‘Anthropocene’ in the film is limited, however. It appears only once, and only for a second, and in *katakana* (アントロポセン), in a university brochure the protagonist is reading. The word is not translated in the subtitles, either in English or Chinese, and is therefore unlikely to be noticed by most audiences. The scene does not appear in the trailer or any other promotional materials, nor does the word appear in either the novel version of the story written by the director and released simultaneously with the film,²² or in the official visual guide²³ published shortly after the release of the film. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the Anthropocene, which encapsulates climate change and abnormal weather, constitutes the social and ecological milieu in which this story unfolds.²⁴

Weathering with you is a love story between a 15-year-old girl (Hina), who, using the power of prayer, is able to change rain to clear weather, and the protagonist, a 16-year-old runaway boy (Hodaka), who is from a small island and is determined to live in Tokyo. Neither of them has a guardian to care for them in Tokyo. The film presents super-realistic illustrations of the everyday lives of desperately poor young people. Hodaka had no money to buy food and so stayed in McDonald’s over a cup of coffee for days. Hina gave him a hamburger but was fired for that and consequently almost drawn into the sex industry.

In order to survive, the pair start an online ‘weather business’ that promises 100% delivery of fine weather at the specified location and

time. Hina becomes a highly-sought-after ‘sunshine-woman’ (*hare-onna* 晴れ女) in a world which is engulfed in abnormally rainy weather, particularly, localised torrential rain.²⁵ Hina is a contemporary ‘shinto maiden of weather’ (*tenki no miko* 天気の巫女) ‘known to exist in ancient times in every village and every county’ in Japan, an elderly monk in the story explains.²⁶ Weather maidens are like ‘an extra fine thread that connects the sky and people’ and are ‘a special kind of person who can listen to people’s earnest wishes and convey them to heaven’, the monk explains further.²⁷ The sad fate of a weather maiden, however, is that her life ultimately has to be sacrificed to calm down the crazy weather.²⁸ Thus, Hina and Hodaka are forced to choose between Hina’s life and the ‘public good’, i.e. good weather for all, which is a solution for one of the detrimental impacts of the Anthropocene. In reality, however, it is too late. Hina has used so much of her power before she learns about the fate of a weather maiden that her body has become transparent. Her disappearance/death from this world (i.e. her human sacrifice) results in dazzling sunshine in Tokyo.

Hodaka who is in love with Hina is determined to save her, even after her disappearance/death. He goes through a shrine gate (*Torii* 鳥居) on the rooftop of a dilapidated building, which Hina had discovered to be a gateway to the other world (*higan* 彼岸). Hodaka’s strong wish takes him to Hina who he finds lying on a grassy field on top of a cloud, the gateway to the world of the dead.²⁹ He eventually rescues her, and they travel back to this world. As they fall down from the sky holding each other’s hands, Hodaka shouts that he does not want good weather; he wants Hina more than he wants blue skies; and says it is okay to leave the abnormal weather as is.³⁰

Hina’s return to this world indeed caused the abnormal weather to return. At the end of the story, Tokyo has had nothing but rain for three solid years, leaving one third of the megalopolis

submerged. Tokyo has become a completely different place. Hodaka realises that the two of them changed the fate of the world when he chose Hina over ‘normal’ weather and they rejected Hina becoming a human sacrifice (*hito-bashira* 人柱).³¹

The anime image of inundated Tokyo, that appears toward the end of the film became almost a reality when the megalopolis was flooded by Typhoon #19 (Hagibis) in October 2019 (officially named as Eastern Japan Typhoon, Reiwa 1 令和元年東日本台風) when the highest rainfall on record occurred in north-eastern Japan,³² killing 104 people and leaving 3 missing.³³ In another devastating downpour that hit Kyushu in July 2020 (officially named as Torrential rain of July, Reiwa 2 令和2年7月豪雨) 78 people lost their lives with 7 missing (as at 20 July).³⁴ The number of downpours with rainfall of 50mm or more per hour was 82, surpassing the record set by Typhoon Hagibis in the previous year.³⁵ The first two years of Reiwa have thus extended a devastating record of rainfall. This, however, is part of the long-term trend. The Meteorological Agency reports that in the previous four decades (1976-2018), the incidence of torrential rain of more than 50mm an hour, increased by about 50 percent; and even heavier rain of more than 80mm per hour increased by about 80 percent.³⁶ And Japan is not alone in experiencing increasing rain, and water-related disasters. Similar trends and disasters have been observed in China.³⁷ It is likely that more disasters caused by heavy rain will occur in Japan and other parts of north-east Asia for years to come.

The damage caused by Typhoon Hagibis & Tokyo at the end of *Weathering with You*³⁹

In this compelling reality of climate change, what would be the take-away message of the film? Is it ‘Pursue your own interest and forget about climate change’? The answer is ‘No’.

First, both Hina and Hodaka did their very best for the public good (i.e. to bring about clear weather) to the extent that it killed Hina. Second, precisely because of his sense of responsibility (and guilt) about choosing Hina’s life over ‘climate change’, it became Hodaka’s life project to tackle climate change. After rescuing Hina from the world of the dead, Hodaka kept thinking ‘for two and a half years to the extent that the brain gets worn out’ about how he could help mitigate climate change, and he decides to study for a degree in agriculture to learn something useful for climate change.⁴⁰ Third, for Hodaka who feels guilty about ‘changing the world’ (i.e. depriving it of fine weather by rescuing Hina), Director Shinkai gives words of assurance to negate his feelings of guilt. One is the point made by the ‘old-lady’ Tachibana, for whom Hina & Hodaka had previously failed to deliver fine weather. When Hodaka apologizes for having ‘caused’ the flooding which necessitated her moving out of her beautiful traditional house into a small high-rise apartment, she says smiling, ‘why do you have to apologize?’ She tells him that the inundated bay area was originally sea, reclaimed by humans, and therefore it simply returned to its original landscape.⁴¹ The other assurance is the words of Suga, a calculating ‘middle-aged-man’, who had previously sheltered Hodaka. When Hodaka confessed that he and Hina had ‘changed the world’, he laughs the idea off, saying ‘weather had been out of sync in any case’ before they tried to change it,⁴² suggesting that it is unfair to blame youth for not being able to solve climate change.



The director himself writes that he would not impose a story on a young audience where climate change is solved at the expense of their lives. He is also keenly aware that mitigating climate change will be incredibly difficult and thus, in the movie, should not be solved ‘easily’ by sacrificing Hina’s life. Shinkai deliberately chose to present this story that may be taken as ‘politically incorrect’, because the take-way message of the film is not so much ‘solve climate change!’ but ‘live!’ in an age when it has become increasingly difficult for the young to live.⁴³

In the time of coronavirus, the take-away message - ‘Live!’ - has become even more relevant especially for the young who have limited employment prospects now and in future. Before further elaborating on the film’s central message (‘Live!’), let me come back to the main concern of this article: the human-nature relationship, as it is also inseparable from the theme of the film (‘Live!’). The point here is that Shinkai (as well as Miyazaki) presents nature as a source of spirituality and life, negating the human-nature dichotomy in a way that is different from the ‘culturalisation’ of nature.

3. Nature, Spirituality & Life

Nature and spirituality are the central features of Shinkai’s two major films: *Weathering with You* and *Your Name* (kimino na wa 君の名は), among others. Shinkai is also renowned for his exceptionally beautiful and detailed illustrations of scenery, in particular, light, rain, clouds, and sky. Spirituality is a constant theme in his films and his illustrations of light convey a strong sense of spirituality. Moreover, the presence of the other world (the unseen world or the world of the dead) is presented as reality in his films. The distance between the dead and the living is blurred or almost non-existent and the main characters are able to

travel between both worlds in both *Weathering with You* and *Your Name*.



Spiritual Image in *Weathering with You*
 ©2019 Tenkinoko Sakusei Iinkai⁴⁴

The cosmology underlying the films is expressed clearly by two elderly women. For instance, the grandmother in *Your Name* explains the significance of the concept of *musubi* (産霊):

The guardian deity of the land is called *musubi* in the old language. This word has many profound meanings. ... To tie threads is *musubi*, to connect people is *musubi*, for time to pass is *musubi*. We use the same word for all of them. It is the way to refer to *kami* [god, deity, spirit] and the power of *kami*. ... To eat or drink something like water, rice, sake, is also *musubi*, because what we take in is connected to our soul.⁴⁵

Likewise, Tachibana, the ‘old-lady’ client in *Weathering with You* explains that *obon* (お盆), 13-16 August, is the time when the deceased return to this world from the sky, from *higan* (彼岸 Pure Land/Heaven). She conducts a ritual burning of a small ceremonial bonfire (*mukaebi* 迎え火) to welcome the souls of her ancestors,

so that her late husband can come back, carried by the smoke from the fire. She encourages Hina to walk across the small bonfire, so that she can be protected by the soul of her mother who had died the previous year.⁴⁶

While *musubi*, *obon*, and *higan*, are not original concepts of Shinkai's films, but are part of Japanese culture,⁴⁷ the fact that they constitute key elements of his stories is significant. Furthermore, nature is also seen as a spiritual source of life in his work. Even rain, the cause of all the problems in *Weathering with You*, is presented as a source of life, rather than a problem to be dealt with. Shinkai has the protagonist Hodaka say:

The sound of the rain was much gentler and more intimate, it was like the beautiful sound of a drum from afar played just for us - a special sound like a drum that comes from a far-away place taking a long long time to reach us. That sound knows our past and future, never denounces us for decisions or choices we make, and quietly accepts all history. Live! The sound was saying. Live. Live. Just Live (my translation).⁴⁸

The sound of rain connects Hodaka with all the memories of life from ancient times and commands him to live no matter how difficult it is. Here again, the notion of nature presented by Shinkai is not only spiritual but is also closely connected to life, the source of life, or life itself. I argue that this notion of nature as the source of spirituality and life is something Shinkai has inherited from Miyazaki. Shinkai himself acknowledges the strong influence Miyazaki had on him.⁴⁹

Miyazaki Hayao of Studio Ghibli is renowned for his magnificent and detailed illustrations of nature. Underlying his artwork is his distinct view of nature as he himself explains:

The major characteristic of Studio Ghibli -

not just myself - is the way we depict nature. We don't subordinate the natural setting to the characters. Our way of thinking is that nature exists and *human beings exist within it*. ... That is because we feel that the world is beautiful. Human relationships are not the only thing that is interesting. We think that weather, time, rays of light, plants, water, and wind - what makes up the landscape - are all beautiful. That is why we make efforts to incorporate them as much as possible in our work (emphasis added).⁵⁰



'The Forest of Shishigami no.5' in *Princess Mononoke*

©1997 Nibariki □GND/Yamamoto Nizo

Miyazaki's perception of nature, however, is not limited to its physicality. It is coupled with a sense that 'there is something there',⁵¹ and his illustrations of that 'something' have played a key role in his films. As I wrote elsewhere,⁵² Totoro in *My Neighbour Totoro* is an embodiment of that 'something', as is the Forest Spirit (*Shishi-gami*) in *Princess Mononoke*. The best expression though of this 'something' in Miyazaki films are the *kodama*, thousands of spirit-like beings that appear in

Princess Mononoke. As he explains below, he wanted to express **the spiritual-world in nature**.

I wondered how to give shape to the image of the forest, from the time when it was not a collection of plants but *had a spiritual meaning as well*. I didn't want the forest just to have many tall trees or be full of darkness. I wanted to express the feeling of mysteriousness that one feels when stepping into a forest - the feeling that something is watching from somewhere or the strange sound that one can hear from somewhere. When I mulled over how I could give form to that feeling, I thought of the kodama. Those who can see them do, and those who can't don't see them. They appear and disappear as a presence beyond good or evil.⁵³



Kodama ©1997 Studio Ghibli

The most radical aspect of Miyazaki's depiction of that 'something' in the unseen world is that he considers it to be not just spiritual, it is actually life itself. In other words, for Miyazaki, spirits are living; spirituality is life rather than a purely religious concept. He writes:

I have felt that 'there is something in the forest'. ... Well, it's a feeling that 'something is there'. It might be life itself.⁵⁴

Miyazaki's perception of nature is closely related to his sense of spirituality, which in turn is closely related to his notion of life. Because they are underpinned with this notion of nature having extra layers of meaning (i.e. spirituality & life), Miyazaki's films convey an image of nature that is radically different from the dominant understanding of nature in our modern society. In our modern (largely 'western') civilisation, nature is juxtaposed with humans, it is the antithesis to humanity, with spirituality, or lack of it, being the distinguishing factor. In the modern/western world spirituality resides in humans but not in nature.⁵⁵

This **nature-spirituality-life nexus** presented by both directors has significant theoretical implications. Through their art, both Miyazaki and Shinkai embed in the minds of millions of people from all parts of the globe, the epistemology that humans are *part of* nature, instead of being a separate category, and nature is a vital force containing both the spiritual world and life. And as I argued in my book, *Animism in Contemporary Japan: Voices for the Anthropocene from Post-Fukushima Japan*, this nature-spirituality-life nexus is represented by the concept of animism, in particular, the concept I call 'postmodern animism'.

4. Postmodern Animism

In *Animism in Contemporary Japan: Voices for the Anthropocene from Post-Fukushima Japan*, I argue that what I call 'postmodern animism' emerged as a grassroots response to the socio-ecological disaster in Minamata.⁵⁶ My

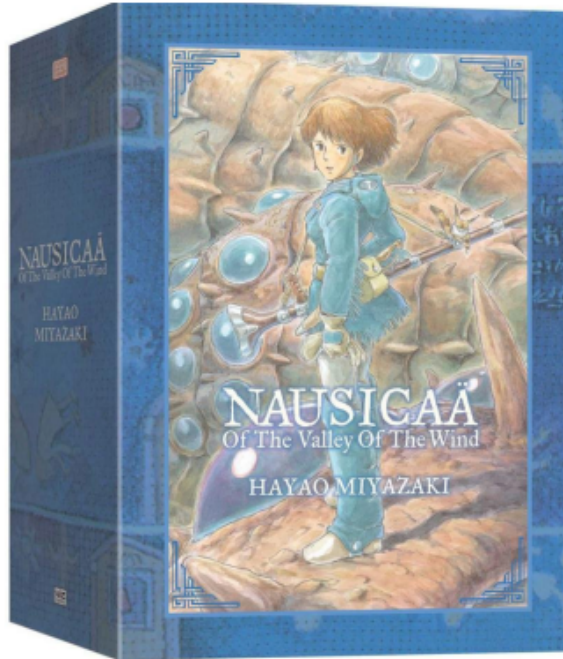
argument is based on the biographical analysis of four prominent intellectuals from postwar Japan: Miyazaki Hayao as well as Minamata fisherman Ogata Masato, ecocritical writer Ishimure Michiko, and sociologist Tsurumi Kazuko. Postmodern animism represents new knowledge that arose from the fusion of critiques of modernity and the intangible cultural heritage of **grassroots** Japan. It represents a philosophy of the life-world, where nature is seen as a manifestation of a dynamic life force in which all forms of life are interconnected. It is animism imbued with modernity while deliberately keeping the core components of animism: i.e. **nature and spirituality**.

As I touched upon earlier, **nature and spirituality** are the two lacunae of our social scientific knowledge, a big void in our paradigm of social science. We do not talk about nature, instead we talk about the environment. We have ‘environmental problems’, not ‘problems of nature’. In particular, we do not consider nature to have spiritual elements within it. This is because, as discussed earlier, nature has been seen in contrast to humans in our modern paradigm which is based essentially on Judeo-Christian beliefs, and spirituality/soul has been considered a key factor distinguishing humans from nonhumans.

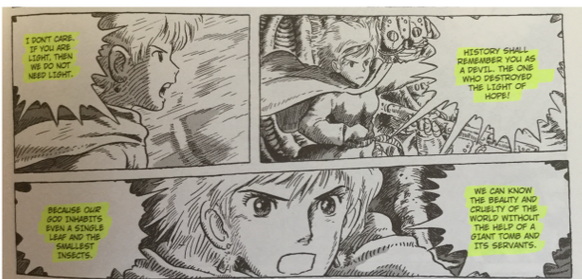
Furthermore, as pointed out by Max Weber, modernity is constructed on the notion that the world is *disenchanted*.⁵⁷ Thus, animism, and recognition of spirituality in nature is considered the antithesis of modernity. In other words, animism has been viewed as anti-modern, and modernity is anti-animistic. Precisely because of its contradiction of modernity, animism presents a powerful theory and philosophy to illuminate our modern society in order to bring about the fundamental change demanded by destructive repercussions of the Anthropocene such as climate change, extinction, and zoonotic pandemics.

Postmodern animism is a *reflexive animism* for modernity, instead of being a ‘premodern’ and uncritical faith in spiritual beings in nature. It critiques modernity and constructs knowledge that can break through the theoretical and philosophical barriers that prevent action on climate change. In the Anthropocene - the age of humans - postmodern animism decenters humans and enables us to fundamentally rethink human-nature relationships. It attempts to bring back nature and spirituality to the core of our social scientific imagination and expands our knowledge base into different epistemological and ontological spaces.

One of the most influential advocates of animism in contemporary Japan is Miyazaki Hayao and communicating the significance of animism has been his life project.⁵⁸ He states for example that: ‘I do like animism. I can understand the idea of ascribing character to stones or wind’.⁵⁹ He also says that: ‘Animism will be an important philosophy for humanity after the 21st century... I seriously believe this’.⁶⁰ His concept of animism is best represented by the comic book version of *Nausicaä in the Valley of the Wind*, a prodigious work of over 1,000 pages which took Miyazaki twelve years to complete. Through the process of writing this massive piece of work, he established his philosophy, which is animism. It is crystallised by the words of Nausicaä: ‘our god inhabits even a single leaf and the smallest insects’;⁶¹ and ‘life is light that shines in the darkness’.⁶² Although Miyazaki does not use the phrase ‘postmodern animism’, his concept based on his reflections and critique of modernity is nothing but postmodern animism.



The comic version of *Nausicaä in the Valley of the Wind*



'Our god inhabits even a single leaf and the smallest insects'⁶³

Shinkai also does not use the word animism to explain his films. However, as discussed earlier, his cosmology and the perception of nature as the source of life and the spiritual world is precisely that of animism. In the sense that nature=life=spirituality is presented through the experiences and beliefs of the young protagonists, his philosophy can also be considered as postmodern animism.

While the need to rethink the human-nature relationship has long been talked about, nothing radically different has been produced. As mentioned earlier, this is due not only to a lack of cultural frames of reference in modern scientific knowledge but also in modern stories, which are nothing but a product of modernity. In order to imagine something new, we need a new frame of reference, something new to open up our imagination to a radically different epistemology and ontology. The animation films by Miyazaki and Shinkai provide exactly that: a very powerful **cultural frame of reference** that enables us to imagine different ways of perceiving and living in the world, where **nature and spirituality** are core to our thinking and feeling. Nature and spirituality are also the core components of animism. Miyazaki and Shinkai, through their reflective and critical observation of modernity, presents in their films postmodern animism as a radical new epistemology of human-nature relationships.

Through their enormous influence at the global level, the two film directors have embedded in the hearts and minds of millions of movie viewers around the world, images, visions, and stories that introduce a new epistemology and new (but at the same time old) ontology, that are missing from the paradigm of modernity. Both provide stories that embolden us to imagine a new way of relating to nature and spirituality, which then challenges the very foundation of our uncritical approach to modernity that led us to the Anthropocene. Both directors inspire a fundamental rethink of human-nature relationships and contribute to the Anthropocene discourse from a transcultural and transdisciplinary perspective. They build a new kind of knowledge from Asia that may help us respond to the crises of the Anthropocene: climate change, extinction and zoonotic pandemics. In that sense, the works of Miyazaki and Shinkai are extraordinarily

radical and significant.⁶⁴

Putting this theoretical and philosophical significance of their films aside, both directors provide a more immediate, take-home message to the global audience, especially to young people: 'Live!'. This message is highly relevant **during the coronavirus pandemic** when people who are socially disadvantaged in any way are directly confronted with an existential threat to their everyday lives, through the risk of infection, disability and even death; unemployment and an uncertain future; isolation; depression and anxiety; climate despair and pandemic despair.....

5. Live! (*ikiro* 生きろ!)

The most direct take-home message of Miyazaki Hayao and Shinkai Makoto to the global audience is this: 'Live!'. For Miyazaki, live (*ikiro* 生きろ!) has been a consistent message throughout his films, especially in *Princess Mononoke*, *Nausicaä in the Valley of the Wind*, and *The Wind Rises*. Although Miyazaki and Shinkai have never communicated directly with each other, Miyazaki had an enormous influence on Shinkai as pointed out earlier,⁶⁵ and apart from the depiction of nature, Live! is another message that Shinkai 'inherited' from Miyazaki. In the context of climate change, Shinkai allowed the 'dead' (Hina) to return to this world to continue living. He embedded a message in the sound of rain: 'Live (*ikinasai* 生きなさい)! Live. Live. Just Live'⁶⁶ as seen above. When Hodaka and Hina are returning to this world and making a wish as they float through the air, they hear: 'Our hearts say, our bodies say, our voices say, our love says, Live!'.⁶⁷

The worlds of the protagonist in the films by Miyazaki and Shinkai are rarely rosy. Although *Princess Mononoke* is set in the Muromachi period (1336-1573), it is actually *about the*

present time as the director himself states.⁶⁸ San and Ashitaka represent young people who choose to live at the edges of the two competing worlds of humanity and nature, to be true to themselves: San on the nature side and Ashitaka on the human side, while at the same time pledging to love one another. *Nausicaä in the Valley of the Wind* illustrates a post-nuclear-war apocalyptic world. In the comic version, which is Miyazaki's philosophical compilation, *Nausicaä* chooses to live in a polluted world knowing that her choice may lead to the end of the world; she does so because she believes in the power of life in the darkness, and does not believe it is possible to live in perfect purity. In the words of Donna Haraway, *Nausicaä* chose to 'Stay with the Trouble' (2016), i.e. she chose to live with others in the harshest and most hopeless conditions because Miyazaki believes in the sanctity of life no matter how small and powerless it is and no matter how difficult the conditions it has to endure.

Likewise, the title of Shinkai's film, *Weathering with You* (instead of the more literal translation, 'Children of Weather') resonates well with Donna Haraway's idea of 'staying with trouble'.⁶⁹ Both Hodaka and Hina choose to live in a world irrevocably impacted by climate change. Shinkai states that he wanted to present a story of a boy and a girl who chose to live in chaos rather than in a 'normal' world attained after they did the 'right thing' (i.e. to sacrifice themselves for the public good) because such a 'happy ending' would feel hollow and artificial.⁷⁰ It is these orientations of both directors that make their animation films incongruent with the category of 'fantasy'.

Where then can we, ordinary people, get the power needed to surmount such difficulties that are largely beyond our control? It is perhaps from a sense of connectedness - as Shinkai's films suggest. First, is the sense of connectedness with people we love or feel are important to us. For Hodaka, it was the

connection with Hina that gave him hope, aspiration, connectedness, love and courage, all of which were unknown to him before he met her.⁷¹ Interestingly, what connects them most closely is prayer. It connects them to each other, as well as to the spiritual world/nature, the world that is the source of all life (as suggested by the description of gentle rain above), or what I call the ‘life-world’ (いのちの世界).⁷² Prayer permeates this story. It begins with Hina’s prayer that she wants the rain to stop so that her mother can recover from illness and they can walk with together again under the blue sky.⁷³ This prayer endowed her with the power to stop rain and bring about sunshine, which she then used to help others. Later, Hodaka prays to go to the world of the dead so he can see Hina again.⁷⁴ His prayer indeed takes him to Hina, and he finds her lying in the gateway to the other world. She is then woken up by the image of his prayer, their prayers overlap and become one⁷⁵ which then enables them to return to this world. In the very last scene, Hodaka returns to Tokyo after a three-year absence and finds Hina praying on the street, praying for him to return to her.⁷⁶

Although they pray a lot, they are not the type of prayers that people use to ‘pray to God only when we are in trouble’ (苦しい時の神頼み). In this film, the prayers are more like an expression of the protagonists’ will or strong wishes (強い願い),⁷⁷ which means they were connecting with themselves and each other more than with a spiritual entity. The solution suggested in the film is for each person to think hard about what they can do for themselves, or for people around them. Hodaka for instance states in the novel: ‘I have kept thinking about what to do to the extent that my brain feels worn-out, and I decided to major in agriculture at the university. I wanted to learn something necessary for this time that has been altered by climate change. Even this rather vague aim has helped me to breath slightly easier’, as quoted earlier.⁷⁸ He intends to study agriculture at university. Indeed, this was the path he decided

on as a personal response to climate change. It is in this context that the word ‘Anthropocene’ is shown in the film: on the university brochure that suggests that agriculture provides education for the Anthropocene.

The protagonist of *Weathering with You* thus learns to connect: 1) with the people he loves, 2) with nature as both a spiritual and a life force, and 3) with his own self by thinking hard about the issues affecting him. And as a result, he has developed his own response to a world threatened by climate change.

The ending of the film is positive. Shinkai concludes the story by saying that they will be all right (*daijobu* 大丈夫). He has Hodaka say: ‘No matter how wet we get, we are alive. No matter how much the world changes, we will keep living’.⁷⁹ And that means for Hodaka to be all right in Hina’s eyes, rather than making Hina all right, as the lyrics of one of the movies theme songs, sung by the Radwimps, tell us. In other words, it is not ‘you’ll be all right’ in the eyes of society as defined by adults, but ‘we’ll be all right’ Hodaka says to Hina, after they have *chosen to live* together regardless of what happens in the world around them.⁸⁰ Shinkai’s affirmation of personal judgements and the sanctity of life are the same as the two main messages Hayao Miyazaki gives Princess Mononoke: 1) to see the world properly without prejudice (くもりのない眼で物事を見定める *kumori no nai manako de monogoto o misadameru*) and, 2) live (生きろ! *ikiro!*).⁸¹ Films by Miyazaki and Shinkai where the protagonists live bravely and meaningfully by choosing to ‘stay with the trouble’⁸² are exactly the kind of stories needed in today’s world which is full of unprecedented levels of uncertainty and anxiety: the age of the Anthropocene punctuated by the Coronavirus.

More theoretically, at the same time, films by Miyazaki and Shinkai provide a frame of reference for rethinking human-nature relationships, by stimulating our imagination

about nature and spirituality, and directing us toward a new epistemology and ontology for the Anthropocene. This is extremely difficult to achieve through academic work especially on a global scale, but their films have already started to achieve this, by redressing our 'crisis

of imagination',⁸³ and by providing stories 'that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections'.⁸⁴

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Notes

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³ Amitav Ghosh (2016) *The Great Derangement: climate change and the unthinkable*, University of Chicago Press, Kindle edition. p.9.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.72.

⁵ As represented by the works such as: 1) Latour, Bruno (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press. Kindle Edition; 2) Haraway, Donna (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge; and 3) Descola, Philippe and Pálsson, Gísli (eds) (1996) *Nature and Society*. London: Routledge.

⁶ Pope Francis (2015), *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home*, Vatican Press, Vatican City.

⁷ Val Plumwood 2015, 'Nature in the active voice', in Graham Harvey (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Routledge, London & New York, p.445.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Yural Harari (2015) *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*.

¹⁰ Jacques Pollini (2013) 'Bruno Latour and the ontological dissolution of nature in the social sciences: A critical review', *Environmental Values*, 22, p.26.

¹¹ The exception to this trend is the discourse called new animism that surfaced in the end of the 1990s. However, this does not as yet seem to have constituted a strong current in social sciences.

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- ¹⁴ Ghosh (2016) *Derangement*, p.30
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.7.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.31.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.63.
- ¹⁸ Thrush Song: Composer Paola Prestini and the Young People’s Chorus of New York City Celebrate Rachel Carson’s Legacy (<https://vimeo.com/423004859>)
- ¹⁹ Yoneyama, Shoko (2019) *Animism in Contemporary Japan: Voices for the Anthropocene from Post-Fukushima Japan*, Routledge, London & New York, pp.1-40. See a book review by Chilla Bulbeck (2019) ‘Postmodern Animism for a New Modernity’ (<https://greens.org.au/wa/magazine/postmodern-animism-new-modernity-0/>), *Green Magazine*, 5 July 2019.
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- ²³ Kato, Hiroyuki et al (eds) (2019) *Tenki no Ko: Koshiki [official] Visual Guide*, Kadokawa, Tokyo.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*. pp.60-61, for Shinkai’s project proposal.
- ²⁵ Shinkai (2019) *Tenki no ko (novel)*, p.26.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*. p.143.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*. p.203.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*. p.267.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*. p.270.
- ³¹ *Ibid*. p.294.
- ³² Japan Meteorological Agency (2019) ‘Reiwa gannen taifu 19 go to sore ni tomonau oame nado no tokucho yoin ni tsuite’ (https://www.jma.go.jp/jma/press/1910/24a/20191024_mechanism.html)’ [Characteristics and factors of Typhoon no.19 of Reiwa era and its associated rain], (viewed 18.11.2019)
- ³³ Fire and Disaster Management Agency (2020) ‘Reiwa gan-nen higashinohon taifu oyobi zensen ni yoru higai oyobi shobo kikan to no taio jyokyo (dai 66 ho)’ [Damage and management by fire-brigade and other agencies towards the Reiwa 1 Eastern Japan Typhoon and heavy rain in Reiwa 1 - Report 66] 令和元年東日本台風及び前線による大雨による被害及び消防機関等の対応状況（第66報）
- ³⁴ Fire and Disaster Management Agency (2020) ‘Reiwa 2-nen 7-gatsu gou ni yoru higai oyobi shobo kikan to no taisaku jyokyo (dai 30 po)’ (<https://www.fdma.go.jp/disaster/info/items/93496faba621feeb5ec10a9b25719ff1753651bf.pdf>)

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³⁸ TeleTo News (2019) 'Typhoon no.19 Damages known so far (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXZ3oiXg8FU>)', (15 October, YouTube Video, counter 15 seconds)(viewed 9 August 2020)

³⁹ Kato (2019) *Tenki no Ko: Visual Guide*, p.45.

⁴⁰ Shinkai (2019), *Tenki no Ko (novel)*, p.283.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp.286-7.

⁴² Ibid, p.292.

⁴³ Shinkai, Makoto (2019) *Tenki no Ko Visual Guide*, Kadokawa, Tokyo, p.61.

⁴⁴ Kato (2019) *Tenki no Ko: Visual Guide*, p.13.

⁴⁵ Shinkai, Makoto (2016) *Shosetsu Kimi no Na wa* [Novel - Your Name], Kindle version, Kadokawa, Tokyo, location 780-793 of 2436 (my translation).

⁴⁶ Shinkai (2019) *Tenki no ko (novel)*, pp.138-140.

⁴⁷ See for instance Rambelli, Fabio (ed) (2019) *Spirits and Animism in Contemporary Japan*, Bloomsbury Academic, London & New York.

⁴⁸ Shinkai (2019) *Tenki no ko (novel)*, p.202 (my translation).

⁴⁹ Tsugata, Nobuyuki (2019) *Shinkai Makoto no sekai o tabisuru* [Journey to the world of Makoto Shinkai], Heibon shinsho 916, chapter 4.

⁵⁰ Miyazaki, Hayao (2008) *Turning Point: 1997-2008*, trans. Beth Cary & Frederik Schodt, Viz Media, San Francisco, p.413.

⁵¹ Miyazaki, Hayao (1996) *Starting Point: 1979-1996*, trans. Beth Cary & Frederik Schodt, Viz Media, San Francisco, p.359.

⁵² Yoneyama (2019) *Animism*, p.182.

⁵³ Miyazaki (2008), *Turning Point*, p.82.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Yoneyama (2019) *Animism*.

⁵⁶ Yoneyama (2019) *Animism*.

⁵⁷ Talcott Parsons [1930] 1974, 'Translator's note', Chapter IV, Endnote 19, in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, Unwin University Books, London (citation on p.222)

⁵⁸ Yoneyama (2019) *Animism*, pp.179-198.

⁵⁹ Miyazaki (1996) *Starting Point*, p.333.

⁶⁰ Miyazaki, Hayao(2013) *Kaze no kaeru basho* [The place where the wind returns], collection of interviews by Ibuya Yōichi conducted 1990-2001, Bungeishunjū, Tokyo. p.199.

- ⁶¹ Miyazaki, Hayao (2012) *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Comic version: Deluxe edition 1), trans. David Lewis & Toren Smith, Viz Media, San Francisco, vol.2, p.158.
- ⁶² Ibid. p.511.
- ⁶³ Miyazaki (2012) *Nausicaä Comic, vol.5, p.518*.
- ⁶⁴ Miyazaki and Shinkai are not alone in presenting nature and spirituality in their work. Illustrations of the invisible world are one of the main attractions of Japanese pop-culture such as manga, anime, and computer games, all of which are part of a broader body of Japanese literature and scholarship. However, Miyazaki and Shinkai are at the pinnacle of the global influence of this aspect of Japanese pop-culture. Only Pokémon would perhaps carry the same ‘caliber’ as Miyazaki and Shinkai in its global influence and Pokémon is also firmly based on animism. However, Pokémon does not give a story in everyday life of human society.
- ⁶⁵ Tsugata (2019) *Journey*, chapter 4.
- ⁶⁶ Shinkai (2019) *Tenki no ko (novel)*, p.202 (my translation).
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p.271.
- ⁶⁸ Miyazaki, Hayao (2013) *Zoku kaze no kaeru basho* [The place where wind returns - The sequel] Rockin’ on, Tokyo, p.220.
- ⁶⁹ Haraway, Donna (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*, Duke University Press, Durham.
- ⁷⁰ Kato (2019) *Visual Guide*, pp.60-61.
- ⁷¹ Shinkai (2019) *Tenki no ko (novel)*, p.249.
- ⁷² Yoneyama (2019) *Animism, pp.43-78*.
- ⁷³ Shinkai (2019) *Tenki no ko (novel)*, p.12.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid, p.262.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid, p.266.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ See for instance Shinkai (2019) *Tenki no ko (novel)*, pp.207&262.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid. p.283.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid. p.296.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid. p.295.
- ⁸¹ Napier, Susan (2019) *Miyazaki World* (Japanese translation, Naka, Tatsushi trans.), Hayakawa Publishing, p.65, p.282.
- ⁸² Haraway (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*.
- ⁸³ Ghosh (2016) *Derangement*.
- ⁸⁴ Haraway, Donna (2015) ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making kin’, *Environmental Humanities*, vol.6, pp.159-165. Quotation on p.160. For this point, Haraway references James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.160.