

A history of Earth in Hayao Miyazaki's environmentalism: from Mononoke to Nausicaä, through Laputa and Totoro

One no longer needs to demonstrate Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki's environmentalist sentiments. Environmentalism, feminism and anti-war pacifism are the three main themes that can be highlighted from movie to movie. Nonetheless, in our current political climate, bringing specific attention to the environmental issues at hand is more important than ever. Born in 1941, having grown up under the bombing of Japan during World War II and throughout all the numerous and fast social, political, economic and environmental developments of his country during the second half of the 20th century, Miyazaki often explores the traumas of his childhood through his art.

There are four films of interest we can review to see examples of the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world. In *Kaze No Tani No Naushika* (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, 1984), an apocalyptic war has destroyed Earth and, a thousand years later, the last humans live in little kingdoms constantly threatened by a lethal toxic forest.



Nausicaä finding an Ohmu shell during her exploration of the Sea of Decay.

In *Tenkuu No Shiro Laputa* (*Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, 1986), the mythical island of Laputa has been abandoned, and nature has reconquered its weapon of mass destruction.



The island of Laputa flying in the sky.

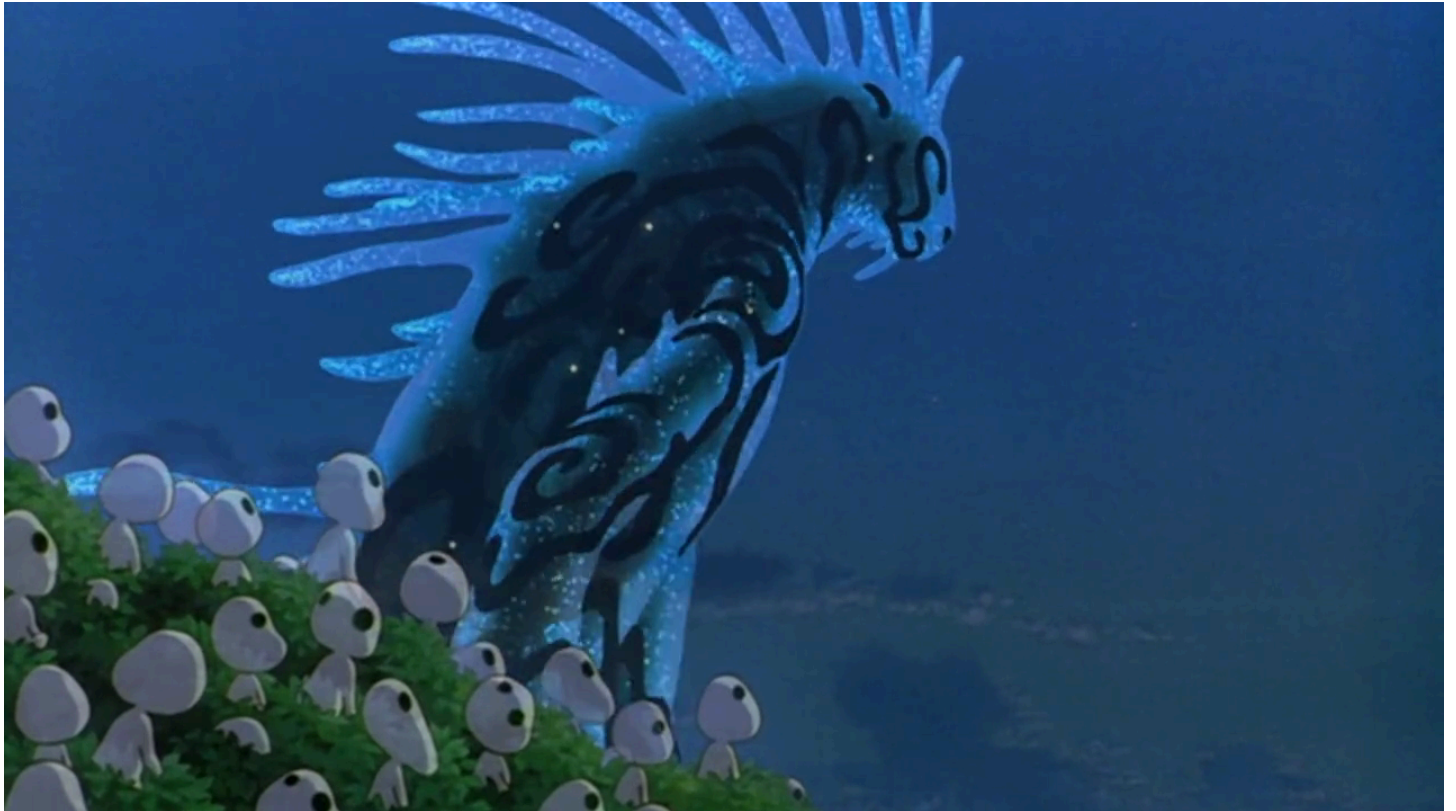
In *Tonari No Totoro* (*My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988), sisters Mei and Satsuki live right next to an old forest protected by the kami Totoro (kami are supernatural spirits connected to nature in the Shintoist religion).



Mei's first encountering with Totoro

Lastly, in *Mononoke-Hime* (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997), a brutal and bloody war pits Lady Eboshi's industrialization against the gods and spirits of the forest – the wolf-goddess

Moro, the boar-god Okkoto and the Shishigami, the ram-god, the great spirit of the forest.



The Forest-Spirit in his giant Nightwalker form and the Kodama, tree spirits

Why these four films in particular? They are connected by a red thread that weaves them into a singular continuation. More than a story, they tell a history, the history of Earth and of humanity in its environment. They tell of the relationship between humanity and nature in all the beauty and all the ugliness of this relationship, all its healing and all its destructive properties.

To follow the thread of this story on a geological scale, we should consider not the release dates of each film, but rather, its intradiegetic chronology or, in other words, the chronology of the story inside each film.

Nausicaä takes place in the future, a thousand years after our current time. Although Miyazaki did not want to give precise dates for Laputa and Totoro, it is possible to place Laputa at the end of the 19th century, and Totoro in the 1950s, after World War II but before Japan's technological boom. As for Mononoke, it takes place in the Muromachi era, between 1336 and 1573.

Nausicaä represents the future, Laputa and Totoro the present, and Mononoke the past; in this way, it is possible to establish the continuity of a greater story, and, thus, analyse

each film through a singular timeline within the greater Miyazaki film universe instead of their release dates.

Before going further, it is necessary to first explain in a few words the concepts of animism and Shintoism. Depending on the point of view, animism is either a religion or a set of beliefs in the “anima mundi”, the universal spirit of everything in the world. In other words, an animist believes that all living and non-living things in the world have a spirit or a soul, from plants to non-human animals to chemical elements. A soul can express itself as a physical, living representation of the elements, as a supernatural being.

Shintoism, Japan's indigenous religion, can be considered an animist religion. A Shintoist worships kami, who are local spirits that can or not be associated to a specific place, as well as gods, such as Amaterasu, the Sun goddess. Animism and Shintoism are frequently encountered in Miyazaki's films; Miyazaki has said in various interviews that he values Japan's indigenous history along with the customs and traditions of his country and people. Thus, these are important notions to know in order to continue.

Therefore, the first thing to examine is the relationship between human beings and natural beings in the past. The historical context of Mononoké, notwithstanding the film's fantastic aspect, is necessary to understand the argument. The Muromachi Era was a period of great upheaval and transitions for Japan. The power struggles between various shugo (in short, official governors of Japan's provinces) in order to claim the position of emperor fractured Japan into different rival provinces constantly fighting. Consequently, the need for weapons, protection and resources exploded. In particular, the demand for iron and wood to make fire weapons. As such, new industries were extensively developed, and people began to forget the ancestral respect to the natural world as they destroyed woodland areas for their new iron mines. *Mononoke-hime* is about this forgetfulness and this bloody transition from a rural world respectful of its environment to a violent, warring, selfish and greedy industrialised world.



Lady Eboshi's Irontown, heavily fortified against San and the forest gods' attacks.

The plot of the film focuses on three characters who are in opposition, three groups with three different visions of the world. On the one hand, the point of view character for the viewer is Ashitaka. Ashitaka is the last Emishi prince, which is a key element to understand his position as the pacifist mediator, stuck between two worlds. The Emishi were an indigenous ethnic group in northern Japan, whose people were displaced and later exterminated by the Empire's colonisation at the beginning of the second millennium (9th century CE). The village in which Ashitaka lives at the beginning of the film represents the last surviving group of these indigenous people about which very little is known. Ashitaka comes from an ancient, secret world in which people respect the spirits of the natural world and observe the balance between humans and supernatural beings. This can be seen when the corrupt boar-god Nago attacks the village and the Sage asks for forgiveness for having to kill him and begs that his death-curse does not hit the entire village.

Hence, the curse only hits Ashitaka, who goes from being the prince to being a nobody, not even a human being, just a lost soul forced to wander the country until he is freed from his punishment or dies. The clause of the curse is that he must not walk the earth with a heart full of hatred and rage. In fact, he comes to learn that every time he goes to draw his weapon in anger against injustices, or just to protect himself, the curse propagates in his body, and gives him a superhuman strength that kills him faster each time. Because of that, midway through his journey to the West, he resolves to be a pacifist, benevolent and neutral. He is the mediator, full of compassion, who

understands just as much the perspective of the people of Irontown as well as that of San and the gods.



Ashitaka stopping the fight between Lady Eboshi and San.

On the other hand, the two warring parties are Lady Eboshi and her Irontown on one side, and San and the forest gods on the other. Lady Eboshi makes weapons. She governs a city inhabited by outcasts and misfits, people living on the fringes of society: shunned people, lepers, prostitutes. Ambitious, she believes in her own agency and that humans have the right to use the resources found in the world around them. She is not so much evil as short-sighted: she has people to take care of, a job to do, responsibilities towards the emperor, and no kami nor gods can stop her in her tracks. On the other side, San, the eponymous Princess Mononoke (“mononoke” meaning “victorious spirit”), is a human who was abandoned as a child in the forest and raised by the wolf-goddess Moro and her children.

San hates humans, she identifies more as a spirit than a human, and the forest is her domain, her home. Lady Eboshi's industrialisation destroys her sanctuary and kills her family, which is why she has to take arms to defend them. Both sides have their own justifications for their actions, reasons that the viewer can sympathise with. As the critic Roger Erber writes, “It is not a simplistic tale of good and evil, but the story of how humans, forest animals and nature gods all fight for their share of the new emerging order” (“Princess Mononoke”, *Roger Ebert reviews*, 29 October 1999).



Moro trying to save San from the corrupted Lord Okkoto and the Forest-Spirit coming to heal them.

Miyazaki intends to show how the absence of dialogue between beings that, deep down, have the same concerns — surviving and protecting their vital space in a changing world — leads to the destruction of all without any discrimination. Neither humans nor the natural world are made up of entirely evil or entirely good things, but rather, both have it in themselves to be violent or benevolent. It is a vicious cycle. If humans hurt the natural world, then the natural world will counterattack, and if nature's representatives retaliate against humanity, then humanity will defend itself. This goes on and on until everyone disappears and nature rejuvenates, as it is wont to do when left alone, or until someone intervenes and makes both negotiate and discuss. Or, as film critic and video-maker Mikey Neumann says in his YouTube video about the film: “Fight less, talk more, say sorry sometimes” (“Princess Mononoke (1997) - Movies With Mikey”, *FilmJoy*, YouTube, 6 March 2017). Princess Mononoke deals with the early separations between humans and nature, the first conflicts of territoriality and recognition between humanity and the supernatural beings that preceded them in the world. The film argues that that balance exists in living together rather than in domination and mutual eradication.

Jumping forward in time, we land at the end of the 19th century. In a fantastical world at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, we have *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*. With Laputa, Miyazaki goes back to something that he had already explored a little in the 1970s: the steampunk aesthetic. Laputa is a relatively quick step in the grand parable of the

symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, and only a few of the major milestones of the story are necessary to continue the journey started with Mononoke.

In the words of director Anthony Lioi, "In *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, Miyazaki imagines a flying city in which nature and high technology live together in peace, a peace shattered by human violence" ("*The City Ascends: Laputa: Castle in the Sky as Critical Ecotopia*", *Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*, 2010). This is the heart of Laputa, and a continuation of the end of *Mononoke*: when both nature and technology keep their distance from humanity, peace and harmony are possible. The childish innocence of Sheeta and Pazu meets and confronts the greediness and blindness of adults motivated solely by the lust for power and wealth. Floating in the sky, Laputa was once, in a faraway past, a mythical, quasi biblical symbol of absolute power, but was then abandoned by its inhabitants. Left to its own, it turned into an idyllic world where its destructive robots take care of the birds and the trees without asking anything to anyone.



A gentle giant, the deadly robot taking care of birds and flowers.

Laputa raises the question of the peaceful cohabitation between natural and artificial beings outside of human interference, and asks if humanity is ready to step into this symbiosis. Evidently, according to Miyazaki, the answer here is a resolute "no". No, humans are still being driven by their materialistic ambitions and their pride, and, contemplating the floating island drifting further away from Earth, as if to protect itself from the murderous madness of humanity, it is given to understand that they cannot yet pretend to harmony.



Laputa freeing itself from man's greed and cruelty and flying away, untouchable.

However, at the end of the 1980s, as if to offer a counterpoint to this partly pessimistic vision of humanity, Miyazaki releases *Totoro*. Quite explicitly, for him, *Totoro* is a symbol of healing for the Japanese people. On an extradiegetic level, healing from their complacency, as the 80s was a period of important economic and technological progresses that lead at the end of the decade and throughout the 90s to an economic collapse, and, on an intradiegetic level, by representing the rural Japan of the post-World War II years. Healing is the main theme of *Totoro*, but there is no healing without nature, as film studies doctor Kosuke Fujiki writes in his essay "My Neighbor Totoro: The Healing of Nature, the Nature of Healing": "Most significant, however, is that the characters gain spiritual comfort and healing through their encounters with nature and its nonhuman inhabitants" (*Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, Volume 2, Number 3, Fall 2015). Through their connection to the natural world, their respect for it and their simple well-being among it, Mei and Satsuki can cope with their mother's illness and their anxiety.



Totoro keeping watch over the sisters while they wait for their father at the bus stop.

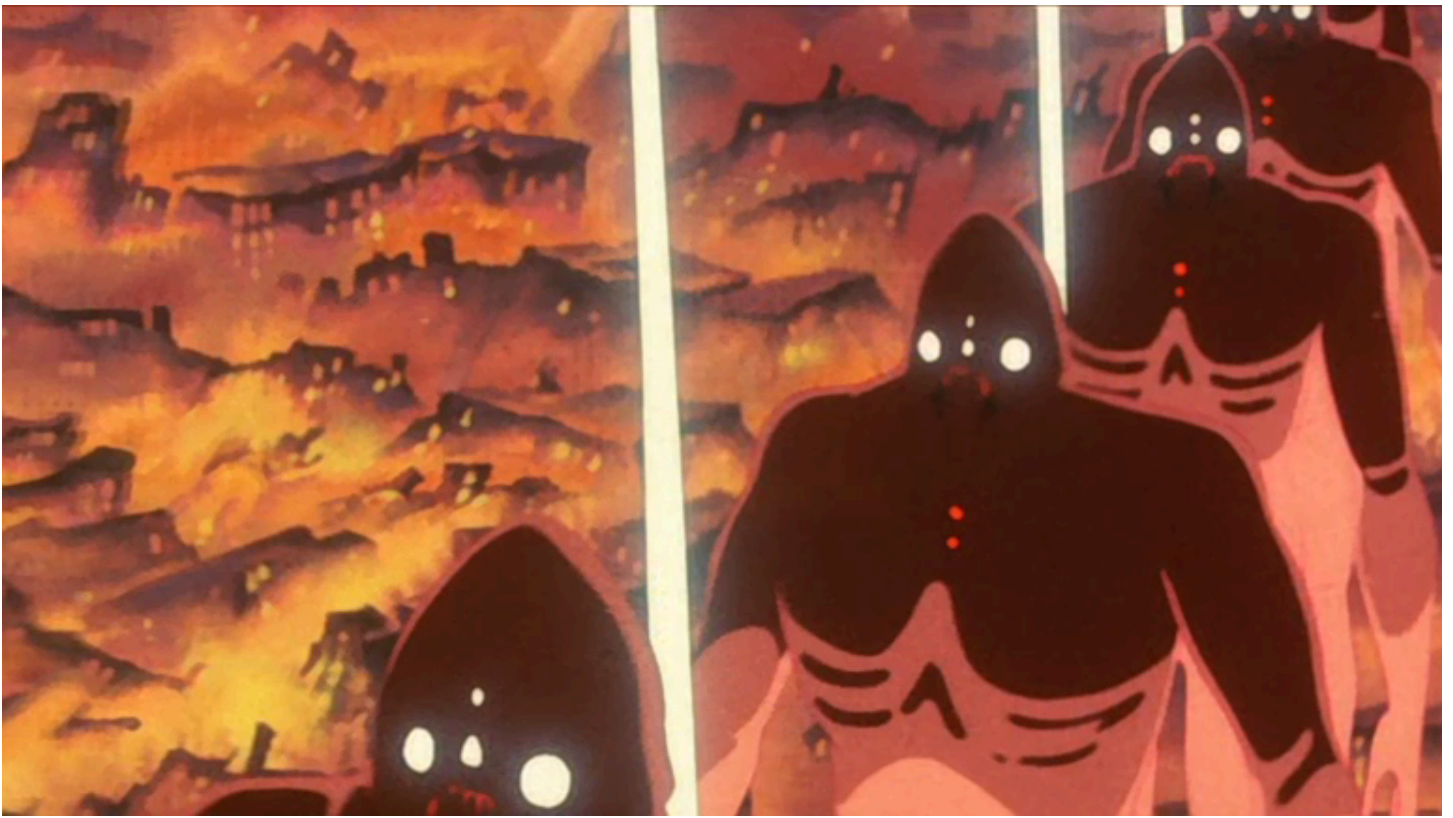
Their meeting with the kami Totoro and the care and admiration they have for the majestic trees of the forest situated behind their house help the sisters to overcome their fear of moving to an old and mysterious rural house. This is what allows Satsuki to find her sister when Mei gets lost trying to visit their mother at the hospital alone. As well, the lush nature near which they live is the key to saving their mother: by praying to the spirits of the forest for help and blessings, and by bringing fresh vegetables from the neighbouring fields to the hospital. To cite Fujiki again: "Nature is recognized as offering not only physical healing but also the healing of psychological ailments." Everything about Totoro is peaceful and pacifist. There are no conflicts, no hate and no greed around him. Because the main characters are little girls who can become enamoured with stories of gods, spirits and fantastic creatures like the Catbus, the cohabitation is possible, and, more than possible, it is beneficial for all. The girls and their mother are healed, and Totoro too gains friends and seems to enjoy their time together.



Totoro, his little friends and the sisters blessing and making the trees they planted grow tall, a metaphor of "nature is healing".

Laputa and Totoro work as counterpoints to each other. Where Laputa posits that humans are not yet ready to enter a symbiotic, functional relationship with nature, Totoro shows that the potential is there, that not all is lost, and that all that is needed to find the balance is to open one's eyes and accept beauty and peace with a pacifist heart.

Now, let's jump back into our timeline. At the beginning of the adventure Ghibli, at the beginning of Miyazaki's life work, there is *Nausicaä*. *Kaze No Tani No Naushika* is the great work of Miyazaki's life, his magnum opus, on which he worked for twelve years, from 1982 to 1994. In fact, before being the acclaimed film that we know, it is a manga, which story goes way beyond what the film shows. In a way, *Nausicaä* is the deepest expression of Miyazaki's environmentalism reflection, and the work that made him the internationally acclaimed director that we know today. In a 1994 interview for the Japanese magazine *Yom*, translated by Ryoko Toyama, he says: "(I was disgusted with) not only environmental problems, but also where humans were going. Mostly, the way Japan was. And I was most disgusted with the way I was at that time" ("Now, after *Nausicaä* has finished (Yom special story)", *Yom*, Issue June 1994). He explains that at the beginning he had not intended to write an environmentalist tale but rather that he was "so irritated" and "disgusted" with what his society and his contemporaries were like in the early 1980s. This historical context is fundamental to understand the proliferation of the main themes representative of an era in this unique work.



The Gods of War, titan-like biological weapons reminiscent of the atomic bombs, destroying the planet.

Nausicaä is... a lot of things. The film is a part of the science fiction genre. It is a dystopian, anti-war, environmental manifesto. It is a humanist tale, a foundation myth all at once. The character of Nausicaä is a scientist, a messiah, a warrior princess, a humanist, a zoologist and a herbalist. Trying to talk about just one aspect of the work is ignoring the other facets of the story and the way they are all codependent. Yet, to consider *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* as a major continuation of the films that came after it in terms of release date but before it in the intradiegetic chronology of the story allows us to isolate a common thread.

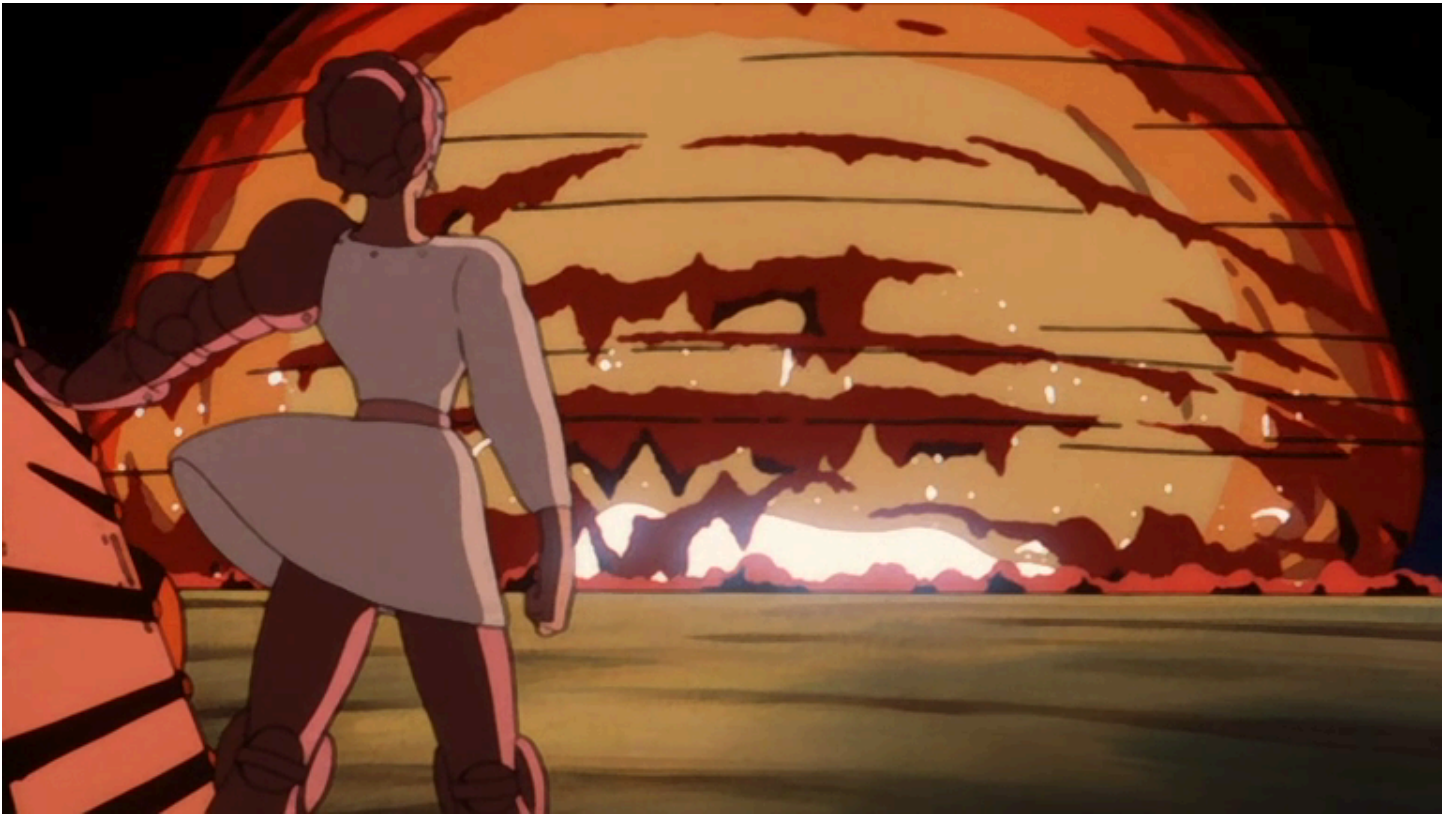
Nausicaä is the final point of the story of humanity and nature. It is the pendant of Mononoke in the same way that Laputa and Totoro complete each other. To quote the curator and writer Ren Scatemi, "Hayao Miyazaki's film calls for humankind to find a way to coexist with the natural world in a balanced and sustainable way" ("In this age of ecological crisis, Nausicaä's message is more vital than ever", *Little White Lies*, 25 November 2019). Although the other films convey the same message in a way that neither humanity nor nature are ever in a position of superiority, and each one ends either in neutrality or with a return to normal, Nausicaä is much more virulent.



Nausicäa standing with the baby Ohmu she just saved facing the wave of enraged Ohmus threatening her Valley.

The starting point of the film is destruction. The misbehaviour of human beings forgetting the vital balance between themselves and their environment leads to their own ruin. It is a well-established fact. During an atomic war, very reminiscent of the real bombs of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, human uses biological weapons such as the titan-like Gods of War. Humankind is self-annihilated, and they destroy the planet. Nature then takes revenge on humanity by depriving it of its absolute reign of Earth. A thousand years later, the last humans are surviving under the rule of the Sea of Decay, a sprawling poisonous forest, and its guards, the majestic gigantic mutant insects the Ohmus. All the details of the forest and its inhabitants, luxurious, enormous and full of life, as opposed to the human kingdoms, in ruins, exsanguinated and poor, draws attention to the insignificance of human beings and their place on the planet on a geological scale. We are but a drop of water in the grand history of Earth, she was here long before us and she will be here long after we disappear. To quote Ren Scateni again:

“Whereas cities and hamlets have a medieval, middle-European vibe to them, the Sea of Decay’s flora reminds us of the coal forests covering the Earth’s during the Carboniferous period while the giant insects that intimidate humans are reminiscent of the ones ruling the prehistoric skies before the advent of birds. To think that such is the landscape of a future Earth is the ultimate reminder of our own triviality against the macrocyclic essence of nature.”



Princess Kushana of the Empire of Tolmeka watching the destruction wrought by a newly-awakened God of War.

Nausicaä, just like Ashitaka thousands of years before her, is the mediator between a surviving humanity that does not see further than its immediate necessities, and a natural world that keeps on following its own course and heal at its own pace (the pace of Earth, step by step, millennium after millennium) the damage caused: the contamination of soils, which causes the pollution of water and plants, which in turn causes the mutations of animals and the diseases of humans. The political philosopher Peter Schellhase describes in the best way the crucial role of both characters in the resolution of conflicts and the reconciliation of both sides (“The Conservative Vision of Hayao Miyazaki”, *The Imaginative Conservative*, 7 November 2014):

“In Mononoke, as Freda Freiberg observes: “Ashikata [sic] can function as the intermediary between the imperialist and capitalist Japanese and the non-human world because he belongs to a human tribe which reveres nature and believes in animistic gods. [...]” Similarly, Princess Nausicaä mediates between technology-obsessed humans who don’t respect nature and the destructive wrath of the Ohmu, giant insects who are nature’s protectors. It takes a pure heart to save the world.”



"A pure heart" - the Ohmu acknowledging Nausicaä's sacrifice to calm their rage and saving her life.

"It takes a pure heart to save the world". Here is the cornerstone of this environmentalist epopee painted by Hayao Miyazaki since the 1980s. If we keep living in the world with a soured heart, a mind completely turned towards profits and selfishly anthropocentric, only disaster awaits us. However, it would only be a disaster for human beings. Destroying nature without a care for the flora and fauna, is not ultimately destroying the natural world. Nature will survive and rebuild even if it takes millennia. Instead, we are hurting and killing ourselves, little by little. What Miyazaki tries to do with his films is beg us to act with caution. Depending on the relationship we decide to have with our environment, different paths are offered to us. Our attitude today, between Mononoke's self-destruction and Totoro's mutual respect, will determine whether the path we are travelling on will lead us to Laputa's eco-utopia or Nausicaä's post-apocalypse.

To conclude, we can quote the nature filmmaker Gwendolyn Morgan's essay "Creatures in Crisis: Apocalyptic Environmental Visions in Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Princess Mononoke*" (*Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, Volume 2, Number 3, Fall 2015):

"These two filmic narratives reflect simultaneously our history and our future with their environmental issues and themes. To bring a sense of heightened awareness and significance to humanity's struggle with nature, Miyazaki chose apocalyptic and

post apocalyptic narratives. Whether set in an ancient past or a post apocalyptic future, the struggle is still the same. What is our role regarding nature: are we stewards or lords over it? Striking a balance with this relationship has always been a challenge for humanity.”

The environmentalist fight is not only at the heart of the 21st century's worries, but is also a fight for the future of humanity, fuelled by the sagacity of some wise people and the experiences of the past. Hayao Miyazaki understands this well as he who bears the scars of the great traumas of the 20th century and yet continues to dream of a bright future.