

Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)

Literature, Geography and The Poetics of Space

Tracing Historical Narratives Across Literary Landscapes



IL Sileno
Edizioni



Geographies
of the
Anthropocene

Preface by Charles Travis

Sara Ansaloni & Eleonora Gioia (Eds.)

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ISSN 2611-3171

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is a collective volume of the Open Access and peer-reviewed series “Geographies of the Anthropocene” (Il Sileno Edizioni),
www.ilsileno.it/



Cover: Image created with AI

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International Scientific Publisher, VAT 03716380781
Via Piave, 3/A, 87035 - Lago (CS), Italy, e-mail: ilsilenoedizioni@gmail.com

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ISBN - 979-12-80064-75-2

Vol. 7, No. 2 (December 2024)



Geographies of the Anthropocene

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SERIES

ISSN 2611-3171

Geographies of the Anthropocene

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PART III:

*Ecologies of Imagination: Fictional
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7. Anthropocene and Ethics of Care: a Narrative Ethics approach in Hayao Miyazaki fictional World

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Abstract

This chapter explores the ethical implications within Hayao Miyazaki's films, focusing on a Narrative Ethics approach. First, it begins by examining historical representations in Miyazaki's fictional worlds, which reflect both personal and collective trauma from WWII on multiple levels, highlighting the landscapes altered by war. Following this, the analysis shifts to the timeless and utopian structures in Miyazaki's works, particularly in relation to ecology and the Anthropocene, seen through the interplay of reality and imagination, adulthood and childhood. Recurrent themes include the relationship between nature and technology, depicting boundaries between historical and timeless contexts, as well as between adulthood and childhood. Furthermore, Miyazaki's films emphasize meta-empathy and the ethics of care, encouraging viewers to connect with characters who care for others, nature, and even inanimate entities. Through these portrayals, Miyazaki's characters take on a performative role, fostering a sensitivity towards nature as a living system within the Anthropocene era.

Keywords: *Narrative Ethics, Ethics of care, Anthropocene, Ecologism, Childhood*

1. Introducing Narrative Ethics

Narratives significantly shape cognitive and moral development by providing indirect ethical experiences that enhance one's understanding and perception of reality (Jensen, 2020; Narvaez, & Mrkva, 2014); as John Gardner argues: «The traditional view is that true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it» (Gardner, 2000, p. 5).

In this context, narrations can:

a) enhance moral sensibility and empathy through the development of imagination- a theory that we find in moral sense theories and in early modern philosophy (e. g. Adam Smith).

b) broaden our understanding of reality, nature, and humanity by exposing us to diverse values, cultures, and ideas, enriching the listener's perspective (Flesch, 2007).

So, moral identity can be expanded and improved by different experiences, even if such experiences have not actually taken place in real life. Moral identity is continuously inside these narrations; indeed, they can also be stories and life experiences narrated by other people that become a moral guide, performing individual normative interior system of rules of conduct (Gottschall, 2018). Such an experience can be amplified, if different perceptions are involved, i.e. multisensory stimulations through films or VR systems.

About Narrative Ethics, it should be underlined that:

i. pictures activate an (“Embodied simulation”) - the physical sensation of something happening to a character on the screen (Guerra & Gallese, 2015);

ii. from the embodied simulation comes the psychic/emotional alignment with the character;

iii. the alignment takes place if there is a positive empathy with the character, even if it is an evil character but involved in a suffered interior conflict. We

also have a form of “negative empathy” as theorized by Lipps which is a not-alignment with the character (Lipps, 2020);

In this paper, we will mainly refer to educational role of Miyazaki’s films, but also to the possibility of such films to be extended to a wider public (adolescents and adults) as a narrative tool to frame distinction between nature and technology and human influence on environment. The paper will focus on ethical implications of Miyazaki’s narrative analyzing two main topics and how they are linked:

1) Historical and biographical representations mixed with childhood, nature, Anthropocene;

2) Implications of a narrative Ethics of Care about Miyazaki’s feminine characters and ecologism.

Before we go deeply into the topic, another methodological note. This article engages with the concepts of the Anthropocene, environment, and the nature-culture relationship primarily from a theoretical and narrative perspective. While geographical dimensions are acknowledged as critical to these discussions—particularly as they ground the Anthropocene in specific places, scales, and material transformations—they are not explored in depth here. The article instead prioritizes an examination of the Anthropocene as a narrative framework that shapes our understanding of human-environment interactions, ethical considerations, and the cultural imaginaries tied to planetary futures. Spatial dimensions, while essential for contextualizing environmental transformations and localizing anthropogenic impacts, are treated here as a backdrop, given the focus on conceptual approaches to how narratives of the Anthropocene influence cultural, ethical, and philosophical perspectives. Limitations in scope thus lead us to foreground theoretical analyses, while acknowledging the need for further studies that incorporate geographic specificity to enrich the discourse on the Anthropocene¹.

¹ For a summarized reference about the approach here adopted see: Dell’Agnese E., 2021, *Ecocritical Geopolitics. Popular Culture and Environmental Discourse*, Routledge, London.

2. Historical representation

A starting point in Miyazaki's narrative is linked to representation of world and nature, according to an historical representation of events. In particular, humans' role in shaping nature through technology is one of the most important topic in his films; usually technology is linked to a deep sense of destruction (Napier, 2018): for instance the war scenes as represented in *Howl's moving Castle* (2004) or *The Boy and the Heron* (2023). War is one of the most important experiences in Miyazaki's life, as it is linked to trauma and regret and it shapes not only nature, but also individual and collective life.

According to Susan Napier (2018), Miyazaki's life rises three levels of regret:

(i) Individual level. Miyazaki was a four-year-old child when he could not force his father to stop and save a needy family on the road during the War;

(ii) Family level. It deals with his family's role in building Caccia Zero components for the Second World War (Arnaldi, 2024);

(iii) National level. It is about Japan's participation to the Second World War and the criticism against fascism (e.g. *Porco Rosso*, 1994).

Historical representation moves from biographical memories, opening a first distinction between childhood and adulthood (e.g. *The Boy and the Heron*, 2024) through a fundamental ethical category: responsibility. This is a narrative ethics topic which derives from the historical and biographical experiences as said above – and it is linked to the individual responsibility of Miyazaki as a child. On one hand, historical representations are linked to war scenarios, and technology both as beginning of Anthropocene and end of “kingdom of nature”. On the other hand, the a-historical representations are linked to imagination and nature.

2.1 *My Neighbor Totoro*

One notable example of Miyazaki's approach is *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) as the first important film representative of Miyazaki "philosophy". The story is about two young girls who have moved to the countryside with their father. They experience the trauma of their mother being hospitalised due to tuberculosis (**Fig. 1**). In his life, Miyazaki had the same experience and responsibility with his mother.

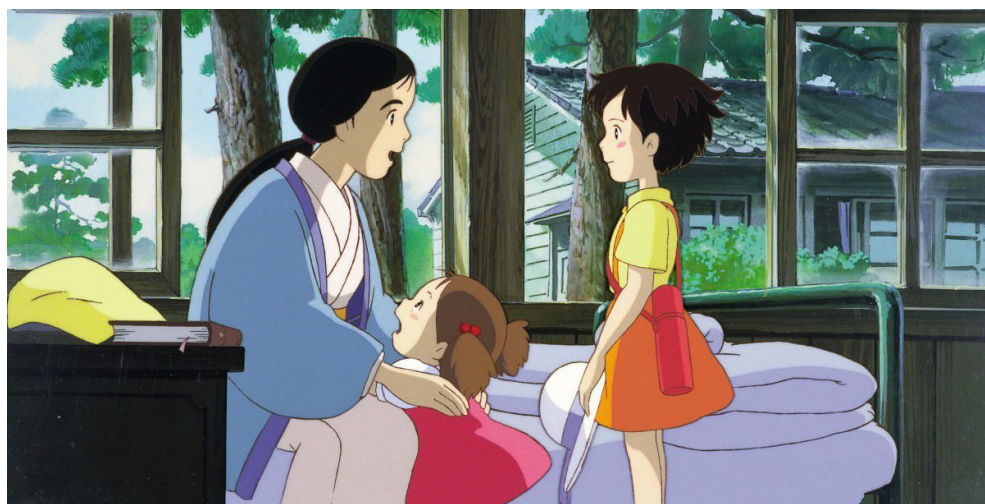


Figure 1. *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). The two sisters and their mother

Source: <https://screenrant.com/my-neighbor-totoro-mother-hospital-reason/>

One of the main characters is Totoro: the “monster of the woods” (**Fig. 2**), the embodiment of primitive animism – a *nāif* perspective about nature which looks at everything as populated by entities with a precise individuality (Trisciuzzi, 2013). Three references provide evidence of this:

1. In the history of religions, the first stage of humanity is referred to ‘animism’.
2. In infant psychology, the stage of animism is linked to early childhood

(Von Franz, 2008). According to Piaget's theory, the child progresses from animism to rationality in analogy to the historical development of humanity².

3. Shintoism, as one of the main religions practiced in Japan, is not only based on the sacrality of ancestors, but also on the belief that the entire reality is animated by spirits [i. e. in Japanese *Kami*].



Figure 2. My Neighbor Totoro (1988). Mei and Totoro

Source: <https://www.framedmagazine.it/il-mio-vicino-totoro/>

The child Mei, as main character, is representative of childhood's perspective on reality and nature: a utopian vision of humanity who cares about world complexity. This "care" is underlined by the belief in the spirits and the concomitant sensitivity and empathy in opposition to the Anthropocene as technological age which destroys and change such a perspective. According to Heidegger's theory, humans look at world and nature as "*Bestand*", as

² References can be found in all philosophers who read history as a progress; for instance, Giordano Bruno summarize this progress in the three eras: beasts, heroes, humans. We find the same later in August Comte with his three stages: 1) the theological stage, (2) the metaphysical stage, and (3) the positive stage.

resource that can be consumed (Heidegger, 1976). Then, forces and elements of Nature cannot be considered as sensitive entities which deserves respect.

2.2 Kiki's Delivery Service

Miyazaki returns on this topic of childhood a year later with *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) - the film focuses on the beginning of adult life. Kiki is a young witch who must leave her familiar place to fulfill her destiny, grow up, and become autonomous. Nevertheless, as she is able to care for herself, she loses her powers. She is no longer able to fly on her broomstick and she is unable to converse with her cat. This represents the conclusion of childhood, and the end of imaginative process as seen in *Totoro*. Kiki disengages from her life as a child to become an adult, assuming her own responsibilities. In the perspective of individual development, here responsibility comes as ethical category which turns childhood into adulthood: it occurs in the sense of personal responsibility in order to survive away from the safety comfort-zone represented by family, rituality, tradition, childhood and nature.

As seen above, responsibility comes in a double meaning and they both are positive meanings:

i. individual responsibility as personal step in psychological development to reach autonomy;

ii. social responsibility as future citizens who must preserve life and nature, respecting its individuality, not considering it as mere resource. This implies a “caring about” approach (Tronto, 1993) by preserving childhood perspective on Nature.

3. *Ethics of Care in Miyazaki's films*

In addition to historical and fictional representations, Miyazaki's films weave ecologism and environmental ethics with themes of childhood and the Ethics of Care. Here, this ethical framework is applied to all nature. Such ideas have roots in the history of philosophy: from XVII century philosophical animism and eastern pantheism to Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 1995).



Figure 3. Spirited Away (2001). Chihiro helping the river spirit

Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/MovieDetails/comments/jnj22s/the_healing_of_the_river_spirit_scene_in_spirited/?rdt=39590

The **figure 2** is from *Spirited Away* (2001). The main character, Chihiro, is employed in a spirit SPA in order to save her parents. In this scene she take care of the spirit of the river which requires to bel cleaned, as it is full of garbage, including a bicycle (an episode that relates to Miyazaki's own life

when he lent a hand to clean up a river) (Napier, 2018). The frame is both powerful and immediate. It is relatively simple for the viewer to be horrified by the vast quantity of waste that can often be observed in the seas and rivers. The sequence in *Spirited Away* wants the spectator to empathize with the spirit of the river; in order to achieve this, it is necessary to animate the river. The river is not represented as an amorphous, defenseless entity but event not as anthropomorphous one; rather, it is portrayed as a living entity that requires care.

This moment employs a strategy typical of animation that “animates the inanimate”, but it also invites the spectator to assume that point of view by placing himself or herself in the position of observing the river spirit as a suffering creature which needs help. Empathy is a crucial element in fostering a caring approach that needs sensitivity and attention (Gilligan, 2016). Miyazaki usually uses feminine character as they are associated to the Ethics of Care approach, according to Carol Gilligan’s theory.

Miyazaki presents the world from a child’s perspective, portraying it as a realm inhabited by animated spirits and other sentient beings that endure suffering within a human-altered, often corrupted environment. This childlike viewpoint enables a shift in perspective, allowing us to perceive reality with an instinctive desire to safeguard both the world and nature. In this context, Miyazaki’s works can be seen as case studies in Narrative Ethics. Here, Narrative Ethics offers an alternative approach to environmental preservation—not through systematic treatises or normative ethical arguments, but through an immersive experience akin to Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis, which envisions the planet as a holistic, living system. Thus, Narrative Ethics provides a mode of ethical engagement that relies on empathy as emotional resonance. This empathy is intensified when we confront suffering and recognize the inherent vulnerability of the world around us. (Gendler, 2000).

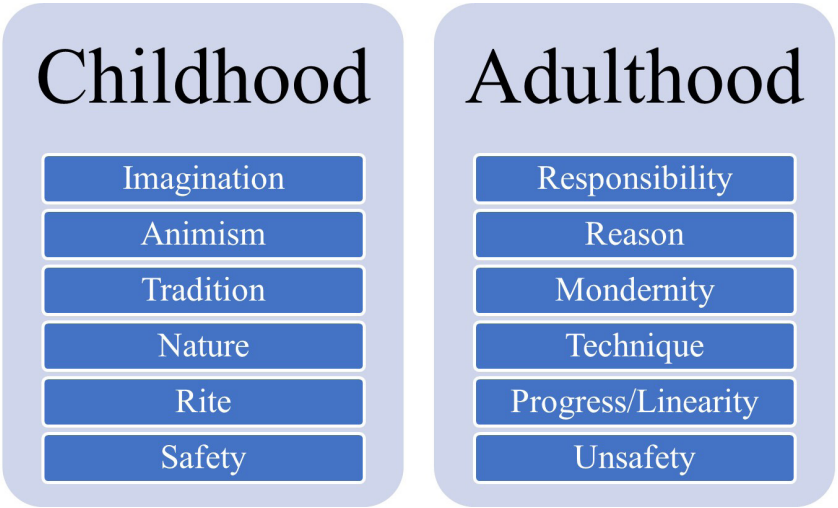
4. Technology and Environment

Furthermore, Miyazaki's films frequently depict nature as threatened by technology and the Anthropocene. The recurring nature-technology dichotomy invites viewers to develop greater ecological sensitivity, though not in the analytical manner of a philosophical-scientific treatise. Instead, it uses the power of the narrative mechanism, which literally places the subject/spectator in a condition of suffering. Especially in children, such a process strengthens empathy—as shown by neuroscience, which indicates that the neural networks are activated whether experiencing something directly or indirectly (through pictures, films, novels). It also allows for a reinterpretation of the world using narrative thought rather than rational thought (Pulvirenti & Gambino, 2018). For instance, Hans Jonas proposes an “heuristic of fear” as moral strategy to limit humanity's destructive attitude in using technology which transforms nature in a hyper-anthropic space (Jonas, 2009). This means we should fear the consequences in order to act ethically and understand our responsibility for nature and future generations. Miyazaki similarly advocates for an intuitive approach to ethical environmental protection, promoting a vision of the world “as if” we had the eyes of a child, as if we still were living the animistic stage. This is how the director supports the idea of a sustainable citizenship, which takes care of nature without many words or arguments, but simply by entering into empathy with the world (Anders, 2007; Gehlen, 2010).

This topic in Miyazaki's vision, which deals with the relationship between animism and reason, put the basis of a philosophical anthropology: the relationship between nature and technology, nature and culture. The latter should be understood as the way in which humans build their own habitat and world by modifying nature itself through the use of technical tools. This definition, although reductive, helps to understand Miyazaki's ideological position and his democratic-ecological education from the 1960s onwards (Miyazaki, 2021; Napier, 2018; Arnaldi, 2024). The age of technology is an age of the predominance of reason as it shapes reality and nature. It is an exercise of power and control that does not respect nature's vulnerability, leading to disastrous environmental conditions.

Technology, as rationality, is also synonymous with the end of childhood. It marks the end of imagination as active creation in the world and the beginning of control over nature. The spirits (*kami*) no longer inhabit the world; instead,

the subject can control the world through technology. We can consider Scheme 1 and the binary space opened by the relationship between childhood and adulthood.



Scheme 1

Scheme 1 can be viewed as a framework for a philosophical anthropology theory, offering a perspective on the relationship between nature and technology through the enchanted eyes of a child, similar to the animistic worldview. Miyazaki’s approach is fundamentally avant-garde, as he explores themes that were not immediately embraced by the public. In line with this avant-garde stance, it is notable that his work was “politically correct” long before the term became a popular trend, as he foregrounds the importance of the female heroine over the traditional male hero. This emphasis on female main character signals Miyazaki as a precursor to the significant sociological shift later seen in the Disney Golden Age of the 1990s. Long before Mulan, Pocahontas, Belle, or Esmeralda (Arnaldi, 2016), Miyazaki introduced characters like Heidi, Anne of Green Gables, and Nausicaä—representations of proactive femininity that stand independent of dominant male figures, breaking away from classic fairy-tale archetypes. These characters are central to an ecological “ethos” that critiques both the age of technology and the devastating impacts of the Anthropocene (Imanjaya & Amelia, 2023; James, 2022). The world Miyazaki describes in his early works through the eyes of

childhood (animism) is already strongly suffocated with *Nausicaä* and then with *Mononoke*; here the topics of environmentalism and pollution caused by the overwhelming power of technology in Anthropocene come into play. Nature is in danger, humans do not understand this, and Miyazaki wants to highlight it; through his imagery, he seeks to raise awareness, finding a way that invites people to respect nature beyond any convincing rational argument. Nature must be narrated as a living entity that suffers and rejoices, to empathize with and protect—like children do, like animistic human communities used to do. This is a perspective on nature that captures its vulnerability, thus directing individuals towards their path of responsibility:

Take, for example, the critical vulnerability of nature in the face of human technical intervention—an unsuspected vulnerability before it began manifesting in irrevocable damages. This discovery, whose shock led to the idea and birth of ecology, entirely alters our conception of ourselves as causal agents in the larger system of things. It highlights through its effects that the nature of human action has *de facto* changed and that a completely new object, nothing less than the entire biosphere of the planet, has been added to the things for which we must be responsible, as we have power over it. And what an object of staggering magnitude, before which all previous objects of human action appear irrelevant! Nature as human responsibility is certainly a novelty on which ethical theory must reflect (Jonas, 2002, p. 39).

At this point, another major theme that counterbalances Miyazaki's environmentalism comes into focus: the power of technology. Confronted with the vast, natural landscapes that populate his enchanting backdrops—often inspired by European or ancient cities (Napier, 2018)—technology appears cumbersome and invasive. A dichotomy emerges: Miyazaki simultaneously reveres and resents technology; while he acknowledges it as an essential part of life, he also condemns its destructive impact on the natural world. Historically, technology signifies the ascendance of rationality over animistic perspectives. In Miyazaki's work, technological power, translated here into “dominance,” enacts Hans Jonas' concept of the “unleashed Prometheus”—humankind endowed with the conscious ability to control and devastate the natural world. In this view, nature is rendered lifeless, devalued, and inanimate, treated merely as a resource subject to human exploitation and technical-rational control. It is

precisely this rationalization of the world, seen as a devaluation that opens the era of responsibility. The imaginative faculty (Smith, 2016; Gendler, 2000), fundamental for empathy processes, enters into crisis. The rationalization of the world excludes the child from empathetic identification and projects them in adult life; it represents the crisis of childhood but also the individual path that evokes the history of humanity, moving from animism to the scientific shape of nature and reality in Anthropocene. Within this framework, Miyazaki builds the foundations of his philosophical anthropology. If rationality marks the end of childhood, and technology the end of primitive animism as nature falls under the complete control of humans, Miyazaki does not demonize technology; instead, he elevates it, rethinking it as a way to combine the real and the ideal, nature and technology, organic and inorganic. From this desire to mix nature and technology emerges: powerful images of robots covered in ivy with mechanisms resembling organs, islands flying in the sky supported by natural forces like the intrinsic power of minerals and stones, and moving castles that resemble wandering monsters (**Fig. 5**). Miyazaki builds marvelous worlds with his hybrid objects, aesthetically unappealing but paradoxically enchanting, because they are close to the Miyazaki's ecotopia (Napier, 2018): here technology derives from nature, relying on its forces without corrupting it. This represents the “good side” of Anthropocene.



Figure 4. Howl's moving Castle (2004).

Source: <https://ibccdigitalarchive.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/2017/11/21/an-addition-to-bomber-command-cinematography-hayao-miyazakis-howls-moving-castle/>

In parallel, something happens in Miyazaki's narrative. Human being is increasingly sidelined leaving a very few room for the Anthropocene's scenario; the kingdom of nature has its own life, and every element has a central, vitalistic role. A systemic interconnection among organisms, of which humanity is part, sets the conditions for its own biological existence. The disruption of this balance, in fact, implies the end of humanity itself, which is not the ultimate result but an integral and equal part of everything that comprises the system. It is no coincidence that the Miyazaki's latest short-film focuses on the simple and essential life of a caterpillar, which becomes the center of the universe. It is Miyazaki's last short film, created exclusively for guests of the Ghibli Museum. Here, Miyazaki's anthropology reveals its essential message, aligning with many anthropologies of the 19th and 20th centuries (Pansera, 2019), displacing the human and staging anthropocentric crises through apocalypses.

5. *Apocalypse and the End of Anthropocene*

The frame from *Ponyo* (2008) in **figure 5** is majestic. The little marine spirit joyfully runs along the crest of a wave that will soon flood an entire village. This frame is the direct expression of nature's rebellion or, more precisely, the impossibility of its absolute control. *Ponyo* is a film about a beautiful friendship, but the main topic is much more archetypal and ancestral, revealing itself only on a more mature and deep level (i. e. adult awareness). Many symbols related to the origin of nature and the world, and the sea as an ancient god come into play.



Figure 5. *Ponyo* (2008).

Source: <https://www.polygon.com/animation-cartoons/2020/5/31/21275470/ponyo-worst-hayao-miyazaki-movies-ghibli-still-good>

Miyazaki's work foreshadows the power of nature on anthropic landscapes and technological development. It is also a warning and, at the same time, it opens up a new topic: the apocalypse. Apocalypse should be taken in an etymological original

translation as “revelation”. In Miyazaki’s vision it refers to a double meaning:

1) In the way the apocalypse is conventionally thought as end of the anthropic world, linked to catastrophic events. This is a recurring topic in Miyazaki’s work since *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), where the final events are really close to the Bible Apocalypse. Moreover, the end of humanity is a prophesied event during the film. The story is literally set in a dystopian future where humanity is relegated and imprisoned by dangerous, perceived toxic organisms, where nature has already overcome the anthropic space. The same occurs about a quarter of a century later in *Ponyo*, where the apocalyptic event is represented by the rogue wave that overwhelms the small fishing town where the film is set.

2) In the etymological sense, recovering the meaning of “revelation” as previously mentioned. This meaning is precisely the power of nature revealing itself, beyond good and evil, in relation to humanity – a topic that we find in philosophical anthropology of XVIII and XIX century. Nature actually hides a series of potentials that can benefit humanity— for instance, the spirit that animates Nausicaä’s character in her biochemical research, allowing her to grasp the beneficial properties of organisms deemed dangerous. But this vision of a human-nature relationship based on the possibility of developing a positive relationship declines in the later Miyazaki. In *Ponyo*, the apocalypse is to be considered nature showing its power, to which humanity necessarily succumbs. Here we find the anthropocentric crisis. Miyazaki renders the apocalyptic sequences in a descriptive and not prescriptive sense (Murdoch, 1997). There is no punished human, but the intrinsic and unpredictable activity of nature that reveals its power. Thus, going deeper into the analysis, the apocalyptic scenes carry a meaning connected to the ecological topic and move it into a naturalistic perspective.

Then we find a second level of analysis in considering the apocalypses. They are not only to be understood as macroscopic events that engulf cities and civilizations but as micro-processes occurring in Miyazaki’s personal life. Through the narrative of apocalypses represented by dynamics involving nature, in Miyazaki, these apocalypses are also linked to the interior life - and here we find the connection with the Miyazaki’s trauma. This follows the psychoanalytic interpretation proposed by Napier: «In an interview at the time

with Yōichi Shibuya, images of ‘running’ and ‘sinking’ seem to fill Miyazaki’s head as he reflected on his age, his responsibility towards Studio Ghibli, and his desire to retire, to ‘go somewhere’ [...]. It is possible that the director was also concerned about his own declining physical strength» (Napier, 2018, pp. 252-253). The final revelation of Miyazaki’s disillusionment comes in *Ponyo*, closing the cycle on magic and childhood. Miyazaki no longer places hope in humanity; the possibility of viewing the world through the lens of care, starting from animism and empathy, slowly fades away and become more pessimistic than before.

6. *Aesthetic of Contrast*

Another significant aspect to consider Miyazaki's vision is to analyze his later works. In such films Miyazaki condenses his topics, revealing the content through an "aesthetic of contrast". Undoubtedly, *Spirited Away* (2001) is the *magnum opus* of the Japanese filmmaker and certainly brought him the greatest notoriety worldwide. When *Spirited Away* won the Oscar, Miyazaki's international fame reached its peak, leading to a relentless pursuit of his earlier works, which were re-evaluated. The topics previously analyzed also find place in *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), which is based on the novel by D.W. Jones. In both cases, it seems that the director attempts to bring together opposites.

In *Spirited Away* Miyazaki's technique involves not only writing but also music and graphics. It is, therefore, a comprehensive aesthetic operation that reflects the philosophy and ethics of contrast as a summative topic in Miyazaki's art. Although *Spirited Away* is entirely set in a bustling, dynamic, rhapsodic, and frenetic environment—the bathhouse—this setting is just a pretext to tell what Miyazaki values most: stillness. In fact, this dynamic context represents nothing more than the frenetic activity in Anthropocene age, where humankind is absorbed by movement, work, the power of technology, relentless rhythms, speed, and production. A rhythm in which we are all inevitably evolved (Rosa, 2015). To introduce such an idea, we can consider Kamaji (**Fig. 6**), a spider-shaped character with four arms, forced to work nonstop to keep the bathhouse running. This is not only a critique of the capitalist system and the exploitation of the proletariat, which Miyazaki knows well considering his involvement supporting revolutionary movements in Japan in 1968 (Napier, 2018), but it is also a broader critique of the collapsed work system that absorbs humans, making them part of the technological machinery. This is the entire context of the bathhouse, where there is a constant comings and goings of spirits and attendants.



Figure 6. Spirited Away (2001). Kamaji's character

Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0245429/mediaviewer/rm4174207489>

And yet, Miyazaki builds that reality graphically and narratively to use it with a clear heterogeneity of purpose, which is not to show restlessness, but rather calmness. This is why *Spirited Away* is a janus word masterpiece, where one meaning literally extrapolates its opposite. The truth of the 2001 film is and is not the bathhouse, even though it is the central setting. The truth lies in the bathhouse as a reality to be abhorred, as the opposite that highlights the value of calm, of the quiet that is expressed in the scene where Chihiro takes the train (**Fig. 7**) and moves away from the confusion of the industrious bathhouse. The truth of Miyazaki's film, after more than two hours of animated feature, can be found in a scene that lasts only a few minutes, whose beauty emerges from the contrast between stillness nature and the movement of "industrial society".



Figure 7. Spirited Away (2001). Chihiro on the train
Source: <https://wallhere.com/en/wallpaper/580203>

This process is stressed in *Howl's Moving Castle*, a film entirely based on contradiction and contrast. In that case we have also a sequence where the sense of lightness represents a need to detach from chaos. In one of the opening scenes, the wizard Howl steps in to save the main character, Sophie, from two bad-intentioned policemen. To escape, Howl climbs onto the rooftops and then begins to float in the air with extreme lightness, almost as if he had no weight (**Fig. 8**). After chaos and noisy environment of the city, the music also takes on a descending tone to help convey the moment of calm, through the lifting off the ground (Boscarol, 2023). It is an iconic scene of Miyazaki's vision, where the sense of suspension from the ground often recurs in his filmography; it is the desire to soar above and beyond everything just like in children's fantasies. This is a clear symptom of the desire for liberation, for a release from the responsibilities of adult life, which we also see in *Lupin III*, when the thief soars over the Castle of Cagliostro by leaping across the rooftops, in one of the final scenes of *My Neighbor Totoro*, as well as in *Kiki's Delivery Service* or, later, in *Ponyo* who rides the waves, ultimately becoming the focus of *The Wind Rises*. The idea of lightness associated with childhood, returns thanks to the imaginary experience of flight, usually on natural landscapes. Not only this particular sequence (**Fig. 8**) represents the desire to return to a state of calm and irresponsibility, but the entire film does as well. Howl has an absolutely fluid, changing, and sometimes contradictory personality. He embodies this process of contradiction. He is both beautiful and terrible, good and ruthless. Similarly, Sophie changes from young to old

and vice versa, remaining hybrid at the end. The same situation applies to the characters in *Spirited Away*: No-Face is a monster that is both docile and terrifying; Haku is both human and spirit; Yubaba, the evil director of the bathhouse, has a good twin sister who lives in opposition. We find more or less similar oscillatory mechanisms in *Ponyo*, where calm water and stormy water coexist; so, in *The Wind Rises*, love and death coexist. Now, all of this makes sense when linked to Japanese culture. All the scenes, sequences, and moments where Miyazaki conveys that splendid truth of calm, of peace through environments, music, and landscapes are absolutely fleeting. They don't last long, sometimes just a few seconds, at most minutes. The director invites the audience to enjoy those moments of beauty, so quick and elusive. Here returns the Japanese "*Mono no aware*" a motto that combines beauty and impermanence: it exalts beauty precisely because it is short-lived, brief, and must be enjoyed only in that moment. This concept is not only evocative of the entire Eastern spirituality but also of a certain European aesthetic sensitivity of the 19th and 20th centuries. In this case, the ethical function of the narrative comes into play. Through what we can call "pillow shots" (Napier, 2018) – those moments when Miyazaki cuts away from rhapsodic shots to let the viewer breathe, to suspend the narrative – the director allows his audience to remember the experience of aesthetic enjoyment of the present, of the moment, distancing themselves from the engulfing logic of a contemporaneity too fast to be truly lived. Again, the contrast exists within the opposition between nature and technology, unspoiled space and anthropic, toxic space.



Figure 8. Howls moving Castle (2004). Howl and Sophie

Source: <https://drafthouse.com/winchester/event/special-event-howls-moving-castle-subtitled>

7. Conclusions

We can derive some partial conclusions:

A) About the topics of history and utopia, childhood and adulthood, Miyazaki focuses on the role of boundaries, which are represented in his fictional works as liminal space between historical/a-historical, adulthood/childhood, reality/imagination, nature/technology.

B) About the Ethics of Care, Miyazaki's work focuses on meta-empathy and care skills. Viewers identify with the character who cares for other people, Earth and apparently inanimate entities. Empathy is considered as personal skill of Miyazaki's characters in order to improve respect for all forms of life. Alignment and empathy are also linked to the neurobiological outcomes of "embodied simulation". Through alignment, Miyazaki's characters can be performative promoting sensitivity to nature as living system.

Now, this is not an ethical theory, but it can be considered a paradigm as Ethics of Care is. It supports an ethical approach and a sort of moral reasoning but not in the sense of the traditional ones. That is why narrations today are new myths that can support moral progress providing experiences to people.

Miyazaki invokes an intuitive attitude for the ethical protection of the environment and at the same time a strong critique against Anthropocene. Miyazaki calls for a perspective shift: it is necessary to protect the environment, as it allows individuals to see the world in a different light, to understand our responsibility for nature and future generations. This is Miyazaki's way of supporting the idea of a sustainable approach, one that is able to take care of the world without resorting to excessive rhetoric or debate. Instead, it is achieved through empathy with the world.

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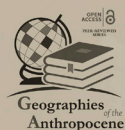
This volume examines the interdisciplinary nexus of literature and geography through a multifaceted lens, blending theories from cultural studies, narratology, and spatial analysis. Beginning with a systemic understanding of literary geography, the chapters explore imaginative, political, and ecological landscapes, emphasizing their relational and dynamic nature. Contributions analyze the production of place and space, highlighting their role in shaping cultural, historical, and environmental narratives.

Key topics include the interplay between memory, identity, and travel in literary geographies, the cultural significance of territorial disputes, and the transformative potential of ecological narratives in the Anthropocene. Methodological frameworks range from geocriticism and literary cartography to ecocritical and geopolitical analyses. Case studies span diverse contexts, such as French 18th-century travel narratives, Etruscan agricultural practices, and Hayao Miyazaki's ethical landscapes. Themes of power, positionality, and environmental responsibility are examined through postcolonial, feminist, and ecological perspectives, illustrating the creative and critical capacities of literature to reshape spatial imaginaries. The volume introduces innovative concepts, including the cultural critique of geopolitics in avant-garde aesthetics, mnemonic geographies in Jewish narratives, and urban-nature dynamics in Romantic fairy tales.

The contributions underscore the ethical and performative dimensions of literary geographies, revealing how storytelling fosters new spatial understandings and responses to global challenges. By reimagining real and fictional spaces this work demonstrates the transformative interplay of literature and geography in shaping our understanding of history, culture, and the environment.

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IL **Sileno**
Edizioni

ISBN - 979-12-80064-75-2