



# “THE WORLD IS CURSED”: STUDIO GHIBLI’S RADICAL ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

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## Abstract

Film critics and academics have praised Studio Ghibli for its films’ bold and upfront depictions of war, the Anthropocene, and human consumption. In contrast to American major animation studios who may only touch upon these issues thematically or allegorically to appeal to the masses, the Japanese filmmakers at Studio Ghibli are unafraid to continuously and directly depict war and human greed. This paper focuses on Studio Ghibli’s ecocritical depictions compared to its American Hollywood animated counterparts, such as Walt Disney Studios, Pixar Animation Studios, and DreamWorks Pictures. Although American major animated film studios do not reflect as frequently or directly on the climate crisis, I draw from the more overt and didactic American major environmentalist films *WALL-E*, *The Lorax*, and *Over the Hedge* in these juxtapositions. Exploring the film elements of pacing, characterization, and narrative structure, I examine how these elements demonstrate more nuanced depictions in Studio Ghibli’s representations of ecological disaster. Hollywood ecocritical films mainly utilize standardized narratological structures, such as fast-paced linear three-act structures and straightforward characterizations, to convey their ideology that resolving the climate crisis will be uncomplicated and that it is never too late to reverse the harm humans have inflicted on the natural world. Such resolutions place less pressure on the audience for swift environmental action and reduction of human consumption. American ecocritical animated films’ neat resolutions oppose the ambiguous and melancholic endings often presented in Ghibli films that portray ecological disasters and imply that humans may be unable to fully

reverse or stop the human deterioration of the natural world but that there remains beauty in the earth's transience.

**Keywords:** *Studio Ghibli, ecocriticism, animated films, transnational cinema, Hollywood animated films, ecophilosophy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Studio Ghibli has been praised by film critics and academics for its films' bold and upfront depictions of war, the Anthropocene, and human consumption. Directors at studios like Pixar Animation have cited the whimsical films of Studio Ghibli as inspiration for their own films (*Starting Point* 10). While not every film created by Ghibli directly depicts ecological disaster, a general appreciation of the natural world rests in the background of every Ghibli film. Although scholars such as Susan Napier and Pamela Gossin have commented on the refined ecocriticism that is present in Studio Ghibli's more critically acclaimed films such as Miyazaki Hayao's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Spirited Away*, and *Princess Mononoke*, there remains a gap in commentary on how Ghibli's films contrast with their Hollywood ecocritical animated counterparts who commonly cite Ghibli films as influence in their own animation (*Starting Point* 10). Ghibli's depictions of the Anthropocene diverge from major American animated studios like Walt Disney Animation Studios and DreamWorks Animation Studios, who seldom fund this type of feature-length film project. For instance, while Walt Disney Animation Studio's films such as *Strange World* and *Moana* allude to the climate crisis in passing, choosing instead to focus on interpersonal character conflicts, Walt Disney Animation Studios has only released a few films that directly condemn environmental threats like urbanization, over-consumption, pollution, or corporate greed. It may be hypothesized that major American animation studios like Disney and DreamWorks do not want to linger on potentially controversial topics to appeal to mass audiences. The lack of environmentalist films may also be in part due to major studios, such as Disney's culpability in the climate crisis, demonstrated by the carbon emissions produced by their theme parks (Pearce).

Yet, throughout the years, a handful of animated films have been produced by the major American studios that address environmental injustices head-on. Focusing on Ghibli's comparatively less frequently discussed ecophilosophical films, such as *Pom Poko*, *Only Yesterday*, *Whisper of the Heart*, and *The Secret World of Arrietty*, I will discuss how these films differ from three American major film studio animated films that are widely known for their environmentalist messaging. The American major animated films include the 2006 Pixar Animation Studio for Walt Disney Pictures film *WALL-E*, DreamWorks Pictures's 2006 film *Over the Hedge*, and Illumination Studio's 2012 retelling of Dr. Seuss's book *The Lorax*. While each of these films achieved varying levels of critical and box office success, all of them are critically known for their environmentalist messaging, and each film is indicative of a different American major animated studio's take on the climate crisis. Similarly, rather than solely analyzing Miyazaki's well-established ecophilosophical depictions, I will investigate more closely the ecophilosophies of the other directors at Ghibli, such as Takahata Isao, Kondō Yoshifumi, and Yonebayashi Hiromasa. Additionally, I will occasionally draw in the Miyazaki films *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, and *The Boy and the Heron*, Miyazaki's latest film, as another point of reference. In doing so, I hope to paint a fuller portrait of Ghibli's radical ecophilosophy, especially as it differs from its more black-and-white Hollywood counterparts.

Significantly, as Pamela Gossin highlights in her article "Animated Nature," Ghibli director Miyazaki Hayao specifically distances himself from being labeled as an "environmentalist" and "advocates for the ethics and values of an 'aesthetic ecophilosopher' instead" (209-211). Gossin continues that "Miyazaki has seen his audiences' tendency to find simplistic take-away lessons in his films that detract from the greater aesthetic vision he intended to express through those works" and that "he and Studio Ghibli co-founder, Takahata Isao, insist that they do not consciously set out to make 'message' films, eco-friendly or otherwise" (210). The directors at Studio Ghibli acknowledge the intricacies of our current ecological state, which cannot be reduced to simple allegories or eco-friendly "message" films. Ghibli's directors instead place their confidence in children's understanding of the "cursed" world that we are born into and are intrepid in showcasing these undiluted realities (Edelstein). In line with Gossin's

research, I will refrain from assigning straightforward didactic analyses of Ghibli's environmental depictions and similarly refer to the depictions as ecophilosophy or ecocriticism. Miyazaki's negative comments on ecological fascists add further complexity to his ecophilosophy, as he suggests when discussing his assistance in the Totoro Forest Project: "If they were a bunch of ecology fascists, we'd quit helping them" (quoted in Kang Wolter). Miyazaki is an admirer of nature rather than an "environmentalist" or someone he views as driven by politicized or social morals. Additionally, the ever-present general appreciation for the natural world in Ghibli films could be attributed to Shintoism, one of the dominant religions in Japan, which links spirituality and the natural world (Morgan 172). However, as Gwendolyn Morgan acknowledges, Ghibli director Miyazaki says that he specifically has "never made religion a basis for [his] films," and Miyazaki's apocalyptic depictions of the natural world are not in line with Shintoism (174-175). Overall, I will avoid assigning generalizations such as environmentalist messaging and religion to Ghibli films.

However, I do not believe the same ecophilosophical phrasing can be assigned to Hollywood animated film studios' rather one-note environmental allegory films, which further demonstrate the unique approach Studio Ghibli films take in their interpretations of the Anthropocene. For instance, even though *WALL-E*'s director, Andrew Stanton, claimed that he did not set out to make an anti-consumerist film in *WALL-E*'s additional DVD commentary—and the interpreted anti-consumerism anti-waste messaging of *WALL-E* has been critiqued due to the waste from the production and the merchandising related to the film (Ludwig)—it is impossible to deny *WALL-E*'s straightforward approach to the climate crisis upon further investigation of the film. Additionally, Stanton has commented that *WALL-E* is deeply inspired by Christianity as the character of *EVE* is meant to represent the biblical Eve (Moring). The allegory of religion presented and confirmed by the director of *WALL-E* is highly dissimilar to the comments of Miyazaki and Takahata, who refuse to let Ghibli films be reduced to singular allegories or simple messages.

To investigate Ghibli's groundbreaking anti-didactic eco-philosophy, I will begin by showing how Ghibli's portrayals of the nonhuman and the human diverge from Hollywood animated films and what that reveals about Ghibli's anti-anthropocentric eco-philosophy. I will then compare how Ghibli films pull away from Hollywood narratological three-act structures and quick pacing by

adding stylistic elements like pillow shots. Finally, I will look more closely at Ghibli's often ambiguous film endings and what these reveal ecocritically as opposed to Hollywood animated studios' tendency to resolve their endings in a more conclusive and overwhelmingly positive manner. Dissimilarly, American major ecocritical animated films frequently utilize standardized narratological structures, such as fast-paced linear three-act structures and straightforward characterizations, to ultimately convey the ideology that resolving the climate crisis will be uncomplicated, that nature is not transient and that it is never too late to reverse the harm humans have inflicted on the natural world. I will also investigate Ghibli's tendency towards ambiguous endings through the lens of the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, what the ambiguous endings reveal about how Ghibli views their audiences, and how these endings convey the complex topic of ecological disaster to children.

### **ANIMATED CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE NONHUMAN**

Miyazaki Hayao's films are distinguishable in their representations of nonhuman characters and their refusal to follow standard tropes of characterization. Nonhuman characters such as *Totoro* in *My Neighbor Totoro*, the soot sprites in *Spirited Away*, the *Warawara* in *The Boy and the Heron*, and the *Ohmu* in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* function without dialogue or little anthropomorphism. Miyazaki warns against anthropomorphism, as it provides an "easy target for empathy" and that the audience will be more interested in a subject whose thoughts are unclear to us (quoted in Gossin 234).

Furthermore, director Miyazaki Hayao specifically designs sympathetic, nonanthropomorphic, nonhuman characters, which one might typically think of as grotesque or frightening. Take, for instance, the *Ohmu* and other colossal arthropod characters that occupy the Toxic Jungle in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. These beasts move, commonly in stampedes with thousands of other *Ohmu*, with hundreds of stubby black legs, razor-sharp spikes along their backsides, and fourteen sizeable eyes that change color depending on their level of fury. Despite the other human characters who live in trepidation of these organisms and desire to eradicate them, the protagonist Nausicaä is sympathetic to the *Ohmu*'s tribulations and aspires to find a way for humans and *Ohmu* to coexist. Placing faith in his audience's capacity for compassion, Miyazaki did not

humanize the Ohmu, inspired by the horrific sandworms in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Napier 73). Miyazaki particularly desires to depict the nonhuman natural world in a sublime light or something that can be both "generous" and "fearsome" (*Starting Point* 334).

Other similar characters in Miyazaki's films include the massive robots in *Castle in the Sky* who shoot red lasers at humans whom they perceive as a threat. Without dialogue, the audience can sympathize with the robots after we linger on a shot of the eviscerated body of the robot who protected Sheeta or when we see the robot who shelters the birds' nest from Sheeta and Pazu's aircraft. The portrayal of sympathetic robots who communicate with the audience solely through visuals rather than dialogue is considered by Japanese film theorist Susan Napier to be "a grown-up and more powerful" version of WALL-E in Walt Disney Studio's 2008 film *WALL-E* (Napier 96). Even though the lack of dialogue may be a more noteworthy aspect of *WALL-E*, dialogue-less characterizations were already present in Studio Ghibli films released two decades before *WALL-E*. Additionally, the robots in *WALL-E*, while dialogue-less, are frequently anthropomorphized throughout the film, further reducing the capacity for an anthropocentric reading of the film. The character WALL-E is, of course, notably drawn to collecting former human earthly trinkets in what environmental film theorists Robert Heumann and Joseph Murray have attributed to the human feeling of nostalgia (211-212). WALL-E is also drawn to human tendencies, such as pursuing a romantic relationship with EVE and being emotionally moved while watching an intimate scene in the film *Hello Dolly*. Just as ecocritical theorist Jane Bennett may argue that some degree of "careful anthropomorphism" is unavoidable (Marran 42), Miyazaki does not avoid anthropomorphism entirely in his depiction of the robots in *Castle in the Sky*. However, the robots in *Castle in the Sky* are made to be sympathetic without the high degree of anthropomorphism that is present in *WALL-E*.

Ghibli's character building frequently offers a contrast with the major American animation studios' tendency to anthropomorphize nonhuman characters, especially in environmentally coded films. The desire to stray from anthropomorphism could be attributed to Miyazaki's distaste of anthropocentrism (Oshiguchi) as anthropomorphizing hierarchizes earthly creatures and places humans above animals; thus, animated animals are commonly given human traits to help audiences empathize with these

characters and reconsider the damage humans cause to the nonhuman world. Miyazaki's refusal of anthropocentrism is in line with philosopher Arne Næss's idea of deep ecology, which ascribes to the worth of all living organisms regardless of whether they benefit the livelihood of human beings. Miyazaki's use of deep ecology contrasts with the opposing shallow ecology that is present in Hollywood films like *The Lorax* and *WALL-E*, as they suggest that environmental protection is only necessary when it might benefit human livelihood and enjoyment. Additionally, both *The Lorax* and *Over the Hedge* anthropomorphize their nonhuman characters to some degree. The titular Lorax is given a human voice, a bipedal form, and human logic, while the suburban ensemble of animals in *Over the Hedge* walk as though they are bipedal, speak in quippy pop culture reference remarks, and express human traits of greed, romance, and guilt.

Typically, Miyazaki's written or directed films for Studio Ghibli avoid anthropomorphizing nonhuman characters. However, the human characters sometimes transform into animals in Miyazaki's films. As is the case for *Porco Rosso* and *Spirited Away*, human characters are turned into pigs. In *Porco Rosso*, set in fascist Italy, the character of Porco is a human pilot who inherited the face of a swine. Yet, the audience is not directly informed how and why Porco was cursed. Nevertheless, we can infer that this change had something to do with Porco's disillusionment with the fascist regime and the war as he proudly proclaims at one point: "I'd rather be a pig than a fascist!" In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro's parents become pigs after they gluttonously consume meat. According to Napier, Chihiro's parents could evoke the negative influence of Western consumerism on Japan as her parents drive an Audi imported from Europe and tell Chihiro not to worry as they will pay for the food with their cash and credit cards (Napier 199-201). Human-turned-pig characters represent the tendency for adults to engage in "debauchery," as Miyazaki suggests, which opposes the unclouded innocence possessed by the child characters in Miyazaki's films (quoted in Oshiguchi).

Another example of anthropomorphizing the nonhuman in Studio Ghibli is presented most prominently in Ghibli cofounder Takahata Isao's film *Pom Poko*. In *Pom Poko*, the Japanese raccoon dog or *tanuki* protagonists are threatened by suburban development, which razes the dwindling forest they

occupy. Notably, Takahata, unlike the aforementioned characterizations of Miyazaki, anthropomorphizes the tanuki, who shapeshift into humans using their scrotums ("scrotums" was translated as "raccoon pouches" in the Walt Disney Studios English dub version, perhaps to avoid controversy and to localize the film for American audiences), per Japanese folkloric portrayals of tanuki (Iwao 105-139). Thus, Takahata does not solely humanize the tanuki to solicit compassion for their plight from his audience members, although it is impossible to deny this plays a role in Takahata's comparatively straightforward environmental allegory. Yet, if we juxtapose *Pom Poko* with *Over the Hedge*, which mimics certain narratological aspects of *Pom Poko*, we can see how Takahata pushes this standard characterization further than its Hollywood counterpart.

In *Pom Poko*, the tanuki are portrayed as explicitly violent as they transform back and forth between humans and tanuki to engage in acts of ecoterrorism and prevent further suburban development. Some tanuki kill humans in these transformation sequences. In a particular standoff between the tanuki and the police, the tanuki attack the police with their scrotums before they collectively transform into a gigantic *Tsurebe-otoshi*, which is hit and destroyed by a truck, killing all the tanuki involved. Unlike a Hollywood animated film, which might show the tanuki to avoid inflicting any serious harm to humans and to "win" the battle with the film's conclusion, it's notable that in *Pom Poko*, the tanuki are unable to stop deforestation with these repeated elaborate transformations. Thus, the tanuki who cannot transform eventually die off, and the tanuki who can transform have no choice but to become human and assimilate into suburbia due to their loss of habitat, quite unlike the ending posed in *Over the Hedge*.

In *Over the Hedge*, the food supply of the anthropomorphized forest animal characters is threatened by the nearby suburban development. A mischievous raccoon character named RJ convinces the other forest creatures to loot sustenance from human households to survive. Controversial or violent characterizations are not present in *Over the Hedge*, and any attacks on the human antagonists, like the "attack" on Gladys Sharp, the Homeowners Association president, can be interpreted as nonfatal and slapstick comedy. Additionally, unlike *Pom Poko*, no animal characters are violently exterminated during the film. Although the other major antagonist in *Over the Hedge*, Dwayne LaFontant, attempts to exterminate the forest creatures, this threat to the animals' lives does not come to fruition as it does in *Pom Poko*.



Ghibli films' characterization of nonhumans goes beyond animal characters, as is shown by Ghibli directors' tendency to animate the background and make the natural world its own character. While American animated studios mainly employ static backgrounds to reduce costs, as the static backgrounds present in *WALL-E*, *Over the Hedge*, and *The Lorax* demonstrate, Ghibli creatively employs moving backgrounds to breathe life into the natural world. Dynamic backgrounds occur even as a character is active in the foreground of a shot. The animism of natural objects such as rocks, trees, grass, and water is essential to Ghibli's depiction of nature (Denison 10). As Denison notes, a consistent set of animators is tasked with making these complex animations possible. Yasuda Michiyo, for example, is the color designer responsible for many of the "lust palettes" in Ghibli films (Denison 9). Ghibli's earthy palettes, which generally utilize muted tones, form a contrast with the tendency for major American animation studios to employ vibrant color palettes to hold the attention of young audience members. Oga Kazuo, an art director who designed backgrounds for a handful of Ghibli films, said that Miyazaki particularly disliked backgrounds that were "shoddy and shallow" and that "cut corners," emphasizing Ghibli's careful attention to their background design (quoted in Denison 10). As described by Karen Beckman in the introduction to *Animating Film Theory*, French filmmaker Jean Epstein proclaimed "that cinema's greatest power lies precisely in this quality of animism" (quoted in Beckman 5). Epstein continues: "On screen, nature is never inanimate. Objects take on airs. Trees gesticulate. Mountains, just like Etna, convey meaning. Every prop becomes a character" (quoted in Beckman 5). Epstein applauds films that characterize the background or the natural world.

Likewise, the weather in Ghibli's dynamic backgrounds also frequently parallels the emotions of the human characters, following John Ruskin's idea of pathetic fallacy. In Takahata's *Only Yesterday*, for instance, as Taeko grapples with a traumatic childhood memory during the film's climax, rain torrentially downpours over the farm fields. During the other scenes in *Only Yesterday*, the weather is shown to be sunny, and include repeated shots depicting the animism and beauty of Toshio's family's farm, falling in line with Taeko's own emotions as the farm is shown to be her happy place and where she goes during her vacation days to escape the bustling life of Tokyo. Yet, throughout the film,

Taeko's character is tasked with deciding between independent city life and domesticated country life, despite the freedom she achieved for herself as an unmarried woman in Tokyo to escape her patriarchal nuclear family upbringing. The dilemma Taeko faces, which is brought to a head immediately after she is asked by Toshio's family to marry Toshio, is likely inspired by critiques of the patriarchal nuclear family and the loss of "traditional culture and landscape" that became present during Japan's period of high economic growth, which coincides with the release of *Only Yesterday* in 1991 (Hecht 166). While Takahata does not portray urban life or the Japanese nuclear family as wholly negative, he brings these topics into conversation, utilizing the weather as a vehicle to convey Taeko's tumultuous emotional state in deciding between the binary of urban and rural life.

### CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE HUMAN

Just as compelling as Ghibli's characterization of the nonhuman is Ghibli's characterization of humans. Ghibli films commonly center on a protagonist who experiences a change, typically in terms of setting. For instance, in *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Arrietty*, and *When Marnie Was There*, the protagonists move to a rural town at the beginning of the film to combat their illness, or in the case of *Totoro*, their mother's illness. This change in setting subtly affirms the healing or medicinal properties of nature and living in a rural environment as opposed to an urban one. Furthermore, of Ghibli's twenty-two feature films, including *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, fifteen depict a female protagonist. The original character of Nausicaä may be argued to be too pure-hearted to be realistic in her unabashed love for the monstrous nonhuman Ohmu and her unmoving duty towards her subjects (Napier 84), although Miyazaki would argue that her character is not "unrealistic" in her care for the natural world (*Starting Point* 334). Later Ghibli characters, however, like the character of Shizuku in Kondō Yoshifumi's *Whisper of the Heart*, depict more fleshed out young female protagonists. Shizuku is torn between her desire to hone her talent in creative writing and falling in line with cultural norms, which would suggest dedicating herself to excelling in her junior high studies. Amid this dilemma, she tearfully argues with her parents and older sister, does not study for exams, avoids her household duties, and falls asleep in her school clothes. Shizuku also has internal ecocritical struggles, like her

nostalgia for Japan's landscape before urbanization, signaled by the central motif of Shizuku's rewritings of John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" with lyrics like "Concrete roads, everywhere, cut down all the trees, filled in the valleys, Western Tokyo, Tama Mountain, my hometown is concrete roads." Such rich female characterizations in Ghibli are notable when brought into conversation with Miyazaki's controversial critiques of the portrayal of women by Japanese animators or "otaku," who he feels do not know how to observe "real people" and thus paint flat portrayals of women (Baseel).

This realism or nuance in characterization is not always as visible in American major animated environmentalist films, where characters are usually motivated by a singular desire that propels them throughout the film. This is the case in *The Lorax*, where the protagonist, a twelve-year-old Ted Wiggins, is driven to save the Truffula trees to impress his female love interest, not out of his own moral desires. The female love interest Audrey is also shown flatly as one of the only things we know about her character is her pure environmentalist awe of the Truffula trees and that if a guy were to bring her one, she would "marry him on the spot." While a Ghibli director might center Audrey's character as the protagonist and allow her to seek out a Truffula tree on her own without the help of a male protagonist, Illumination Studio did not decide to show Audrey with such a range.

Equally captivating as the characterization of its protagonists is Ghibli filmmakers' tendency to give developmental and nuanced arcs for its films' antagonists. The female antagonists of *Princess Mononoke* and *Nausicaä* are not portrayed as entirely evil, even though they desire to destroy parts of the environment for their gain. Princess Kushana in *Nausicaä*, for example, desires to exterminate the Ohmu out of her misunderstanding of them and the Toxic Jungle, although her intentions to protect the humans from the Ohmu are somewhat pure. Kushana, who is disfigured due to an attack from these giant insects, is compelled to protect her subjects with violence, and Nausicaä "diagnoses Kushana's disposition to violence as being rooted in fear" (DeWeese-Boyd 10), further demonstrating the rich interiority of Ghibli's antagonists. The complex antagonists in Ghibli's ecocritical films showcase the intricacies of the climate crisis and underline how these intricacies cannot be animated with black-and-white characterizations. Yet, black-and-white characterizations are

commonly employed by major American animated studios, especially in ecocritical films. In Illumination's *The Lorax* and DreamWorks *Over the Hedge*, flat characterizations are used to depict the primary antagonists in the film. In *Over the Hedge*, for example, the antagonist humans are suburbanites with no regard for the environment as they purchase junk food and flat-screen televisions. The major antagonists, Gladys Sharp, and Dwayne LaFontant, have no other potential demonstrations of interiority as they are shown to be driven entirely by their desire to kill the nonhuman protagonists, who they view as othered pests. As the protagonist RJ the raccoon declares, "Enough is never enough" for these irredeemable and under-fleshed characters.

Furthermore, while the major American animated studios typically utilize a cartoonishly evil villain to propel their plots, many of Ghibli's films, specifically the non-Miyazaki-directed films I underscore in this paper, have no antagonists. In *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Only Yesterday*, and *Whisper of the Heart*, there are no primary antagonistic characters. Ghibli's antagonist-less films also sometimes follow a bildungsroman or a coming-of-age format to move the plot forward in a nonstandard fashion. In *Only Yesterday*, the farmers, who might have been antagonists to nature in another type of ecocritical film, speak of how they make their best effort not to antagonize the land they harvest from. The farmers desire to coexist with nature and lend her a "helping hand" when they can. In *Only Yesterday*, the gentle acceptance of ephemerality perhaps replaces antagonists as instead, throughout the film, twenty-seven-year-old Taeko comes to terms with her aging self and reflects on her childhood growing up in Tokyo. Through this reckoning with the past, Taeko decides to start a life in the countryside with Toshio, where it is suggested that she and Toshio become romantically involved.

Antagonist-less films may be representative of the *Kishōtenketsu* narrative structure that is heavily present in East Asian storytelling, which does not center on a driving conflict, though conflicts can still be present. However, in later Ghibli films, the *Kishōtenketsu* format "increasingly strained to contain" Miyazaki, who expressed frustration with set narrative structures and demonstrated Ghibli's refusal to be contained by narrative structures (Animation Obsessive). While it is also sometimes the case in American major environmentalist animated films that there are no antagonists present, especially more recently, the lack of antagonists is a formal decision that is

continuously present, even in early Studio Ghibli films like *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Whisper of the Heart*, and *Only Yesterday*.

### **PLOT STRUCTURE AND BREATHING ROOM**

Another way in which Ghibli distinguishes itself from other animated studios is through its films' nonstandard plot structures and pacing. Ghibli films such as *Only Yesterday*, *Whisper of the Heart*, *Pom Poko*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, and *The Boy and the Heron* avoid clear-cut three-act structures. *Only Yesterday* utilizes a nonlinear plot in which we move between the past and the present of Taeko's life as Taeko grapples with the abuse in her past and how to move forward as an adult. While there may be a clear climax, the scene in which Taeko runs into the torrential downpour (as discussed earlier), clear acts are hard to define throughout the film due to the meandering plot. Moreover, the narrative structure and genre may be hard to pinpoint, as although one might label *Only Yesterday* as a coming-of-age narrative, Taeko is 27 years old and far past the traditional age for a bildungsroman narrative, which typically takes place during a character's late childhood or teenage years where they experience the most physical and mental change. Major American animation studios will frequently utilize established narratological structures such as the hero's journey, as demonstrated in the straightforward narratives, and this remains the case in *The Lorax*, *Over the Hedge*, and *WALL-E*. Although there is no inherent issue in using these tried-and-true plot structures, Ghibli films like *Only Yesterday* stand out as almost Derridean in their refusal of genre with multiple points of conflict and habitual ambivalent resolutions. Thus, where one might think of *Only Yesterday* as a bildungsroman, Takahata pushes against the genre by playing with the age of the protagonist. And where Hollywood studios might imagine a bildungsroman in a three-act structure, as is the case for several Hollywood animated movies like *The Lorax*, Takahata instead employs a nonlinear narrative through fragmented glimpses into Taeko's childhood in Tokyo.

As American major studios commonly employ animation for films that appeal to young audiences, logically, they will apply recognizable Western plot structures that are packed with action throughout. However, by avoiding scenes without dialogue and instead placing emphasis on musical numbers and fight

sequences, major American animated studios signify that they do not trust the fickle attention spans of children.

Although *WALL-E* was praised by film critics for its surprising lack of dialogue in the first half of the film, *WALL-E* still utilizes a linear three-act structure. A unique scene in *WALL-E* is when WALL-E, propelled by a fire extinguisher, dances in outer space with EVE. This scene does not drive the plot forward and is added for aesthetic technique and to build humanlike intimacy between WALL-E and EVE. Such scenes give films a chance to breathe amidst the intense action and life-and-death plot scenarios. Such scenes are seldom used in major American children's animated films, perhaps due to pressures from higher-ups in the animation studio; e.g., former chief creative officer of Pixar John Lasseter discussed in the foreword to *Starting Point*, a "certain" studio executive at Pixar who disliked movies that did not "[race] nonstop to [their] conclusion" (11), yet scenes like these are generously sprinkled throughout Studio Ghibli's films, to give the audience a chance to catch their breath. A famous example of this pacing is in the scene where Mei and Satsuki sleepily wait for their father's bus in the rain in *Totoro*. Lasseter cites being deeply inspired by this scene as "you feel the waiting, and it's not tedious" (12). Lasseter says that Miyazaki's films have inspired him to "slow down the action a little bit" and avoid the standard fast pacing in American major animated films (12).

"Breathing" sequences like Mei and Satsuki waiting for the bus are less common, while shorter five-second "pillow shots" sprinkled between dynamic scenes in most Studio Ghibli films are commonly utilized. Pillow shots, derived from the "pillow words" of Japanese *waka* poetry and popularized by the Japanese filmmaker Ozu Yasujirō, are a cutaway to a visual element, often a landscape, that does not advance the narrative (Bordwell 158). However, Miyazaki suggests in an interview with Roger Ebert that he does not "think it's like the pillow word" and instead ascribes these cutaways to the Japanese concept of *ma* or "emptiness" (quoted in Ebert). *Ma*, as Miyazaki describes, is valuable in Ghibli's films because "if you have non-stop action with no breathing space at all, it's just busyness, but if you take a moment, then the tension building in the film can grow into a wider dimension" (quoted in Ebert). In Studio Ghibli films, these cutaways generally showcase the landscape or other depictions of nature. The pillow shots or *ma* help build the audience's appreciation of the natural world and also signify trust in the viewers' attention spans, as they provide a less action-heavy viewing

experience than the standard American major animated studio film. Even in *My Neighbor Totoro*'s short runtime, pillow shots are abundantly used by Miyazaki. Cutaway shots of rice paddy fields, a frog sitting in a puddle, and a snail climbing up a crop aid the audience in seeing the natural world through the unclouded eyes of young protagonists Mei and Satsuki.

### **AMBIGUOUS ENDINGS: "THE FUTURE IS CLEAR. IT'S GOING TO FALL APART."**

There is a tendency for the directors at Studio Ghibli to resolve their films in an ambiguous hum rather than a staccato final note or a harmonious chord. American children's animated narratives generally have their stories tied up in a neat bow where the antagonists are properly punished, the conflicts are fully resolved, and the protagonists live happily ever after. Ghibli directors are comfortable with ambiguous and potentially unsatisfactory endings, which in turn work more effectively to validate the imminent threat posed by the climate crisis. The argument of whether the simplification of ecocritical narratives present in major ecocritical animated films is effective in audiences has of course been debated over the years, with critics such as Donna Lee King and Star A. Muir against oversimplification and critics such as David Ingram arguing for the audience reach and emotional response generated by uncomplicated narratives, although my article sides with the former (Starosielski 148-150).

Let us begin by comparing the conclusion of Ghibli's *Pom Poko* with Illumination's *The Lorax*. Illumination's adaptation of *The Lorax* alters the intentionally ambiguous ending of Dr. Seuss's book *The Lorax*, which ends with young readers being told that it is up to them to fight against environmental destruction. The last act of Illumination's *The Lorax* is complete with a perfervid chase scene, the planting of the Truffula seed, and an ensemble musical number where the residents of Thneedville joyfully sing: "Let it grow!" Over time, the Truffula forest is shown to recover, and the Lorax returns to its habitat. While perhaps more satisfactory to general audiences, Illumination's conclusion does not pass the metaphorical torch to children, as Seuss's book does. In Seuss's uncertain conclusion to *The Lorax*, The Lorax breaks the fourth wall to tell the child audiences: "UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." However, the ending of Illumination's *The Lorax*

communicates to children that they do not need to change their ways as a character like Ted will eventually step up to the plate and perform this laborious task instead for the sake of impressing the girl he is romantically interested in.

The 2012 film ending to *The Lorax* vastly diverges from *Pom Poko*, which ends dubiously like Seuss's book *The Lorax*. At the end of *Pom Poko*, the tanuki Ponchiki breaks the fourth wall and addresses the viewer, begging them to reconsider urbanization and deforestation, especially for the sake of animals, such as rabbits, who are unable to transform into humans after their habitat is razed to the ground. As the shot zooms out, the tanuki are revealed to dwell on a golf course surrounded by suburbia. The central conflict of the threat of urbanization remains unresolved by the end of *Pom Poko*, and the tanuki urges viewers to protect the remaining land to avoid further displacing animals. Although *Pom Poko* provides a call for action, Takahata's conclusion is pessimistic that action will be taken, as represented by the dimly lit sprawling expanse of suburbia we are shown at the end of the film.

Examining the endings of *Castle in the Sky* and *Arrietty*, we can analyze how these Ghibli film conclusions deviate from their American ecocritical counterparts. At the end of *Castle in the Sky*, Sheeta and Pazu recite a spell of destruction to destroy the bottom of Laputa and prevent its further exploitation by humans. When the castle floats away into the atmosphere, we catch a final glimpse of the robot Sheeta and Pazu met when they first arrived on Laputa, still harboring the bird nest and unharmed by the lower destruction of Laputa. As Japanese animated film theorist Susan Napier suggests about the "unsettling view" of Laputa at the end of *Castle in the Sky*: "Laputa's vision of the castle flying away blends science fiction and fantasy to ask whether humanity even deserves to be part of the world" (Napier 94). Napier's analysis further aligns with Miyazaki's views on the notions of hierarchy between humans and nonhumans, as Miyazaki is "disgusted by the notion that man is the ultimate being, chosen by God" (quoted in Oshiguchi). When the adult human characters in *Castle in the Sky* arrive on Laputa, they desire to loot the floating island's resources and exploit the island for the purpose of world domination. If the intentions for humans' use of the natural world are always impure, then perhaps humans do not deserve to coexist with the natural world at all.

The ending of *The Secret World of Arrietty* is ambiguous in a similar way to *Castle in the Sky*. A fairytale-esque "happily ever after" ending is even expertly



teased by director Yonebayashi in *Arrietty*, with the plot point of the ideal doll house for the borrowers within the human house. However, director Yonebayashi and screenwriter Miyazaki recognize the power dynamics at play in *Arrietty*. In the diegesis of *Arrietty*, borrowers could never fully live at ease being seen and relying on humans, who could easily kill the borrowers in a single footstep. Therefore, in the Japanese release, *Arrietty* concludes with a heartfelt goodbye between Shō and Arrietty. Arrietty and her family sail down a creek on a teapot boat in search of a new home as the credits roll. The fate of Arrietty's family and Shō's surgery remains unknown. The species of borrowers, or miniature humans, could metaphorically signify the endangered species that inhabit the earth. Yet, rather than anthropomorphizing endangered species, Yonebayashi 'borrows' the concept of Mary Norton's children's book *The Borrowers* and effectively showcases this endangered species dynamic with only human characters. *Arrietty's* inconclusive ending works to underscore that the borrowers cannot safely coexist with humans because of the human inclination for violence and exploitation of the natural world.

The resolutions of *Castle in the Sky* and *Arrietty* can also be investigated through the lens of *mono no aware*, as it is likely that the natural world and its species will, in these films, fall apart eventually due to the greed of humans. There is a point where humans cannot undo or resolve the damage they have done to the natural world and its organisms. Despite his frustration with the human condition and our high potential for failure, Miyazaki and the other directors at Ghibli have expressed their desire to show viewers that "there are things in this world that are beautiful, that are important, that are worth striving for" (Oshiguchi 52). Japanese culture values change and temporality with expressions like *mono no aware*, the concept of *ichi-go ichi-e*, and the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*. *Mono no aware*, popularized in the Edo period in Japan, refers to the cognizance of the passage of time and the gentle grief of the impermanence of everything on earth. As Japanese cultural theorist Donald Richie observes, *mono no aware* has a "Buddhistic insistence upon recognition of the eternal flux of life upon this earth" and that "this is the authentic Japanese attitude toward death and disaster" (quoted in Feleppa 106-119). Ghibli films like *Castle in the Sky* and *Arrietty* acknowledge the "eternal flux of life upon this earth" in their strikingly

melancholic endings, which can be interpreted as unhelpful about the future of earth's organisms.

In contrast, as described previously, the resolutions to *WALL-E* and *The Lorax* convey that humans deserve a second chance to coexist harmoniously with the natural world and that it is never too late for humans to undo the harm they have inflicted on the natural world. These resolutions, while neat and satisfactory for young viewers, may end in a manner that is too clean-cut. If children are led to believe that, as is the case for *WALL-E*, humans can always leave and return to the earth hundreds of years later as the earth will repair itself with time, what incentive is there for children to desire to undertake any kind of environmental activism? As presented in the final shot of *WALL-E*, the camera pans out to reveal thousands of green sprouts propagating the once desolate earth until we end on a final hopeful shot of the earth as seen from outer space. The final shot of *WALL-E* can be compared to *Nausicaä*, which ends on a similarly hopeful final shot. The final shot of *Nausicaä* showcases Nausicaä's abandoned gas mask next to a single plant sprout from the Chiko seeds Nausicaä left behind in the sea of decay. The conclusion of *Nausicaä*, which critics argue is more simplistic and "upbeat" than later Ghibli films (Napier 84-85) like *Princess Mononoke*, signals that perhaps one day, humans will be able to again live in an unpolluted world where there is no need for gas masks. *Nausicaä* is more hopeful about the state of the world than later Ghibli films (Napier 84-85), which might have killed off Nausicaä during the Ohmu stampede and might not show such a saccharine final frame. Still, the single sprout shown in the final frame of *Nausicaä* pales in comparison to the thousands of sprouts we see in the overly idealistic final pan out of *WALL-E*. Whereas a single sprout in *Nausicaä* suggests a possibility or a gentle hope that renewal is possible in the final frame, *WALL-E*'s uncountable number of sprouts suggests that the earth's quick and abundant renewal will always be possible when humans are ready to acknowledge the climate crisis.

The preference for major American animation studios to provide direct resolutions is further accentuated when we juxtapose the Japanese versions of Studio Ghibli films with their English dubs. Exemplified in Jennifer Nicholson's chapter "The Translation and Adaptation of Miyazaki's Spirit Princess in the West," Miramax's dub of *Princess Mononoke* alters essential dialogue from the original film (Nicholson 133-150). The penchant for American studios to modify

vital plot points in the Ghibli film dubs extends beyond the English dub of *Princess Mononoke*. For instance, the ambivalent ending to *Arrietty* is altered in the Walt Disney Studios dub, as there is an added epilogue where Shō reveals that his surgery was successful and he heard rumors from neighboring households about missing items, which confirms the safety of Arrietty's family. Arrietty's notably ambivalent ending, which aptly reflects the worsening state of the climate crisis, is erased in the Walt Disney Studio version, "Americanizing" the plot structure and making it more palatable for North American audiences.

Additionally, Walt Disney Studio's dub of *Whisper of the Heart* minimizes Seiji's bold marriage proposal to Shizuku. Instead of "Ore to kekkon shitekurenaiika?" which directly translates to "Will you marry me?" the English dubbed Seiji asks sheepishly, "Could you see us getting married someday?" Miyazaki, the screenwriter and producer of director Kondō Yoshifumi's *Whisper of the Heart*, justified the film's original ending as he felt this generation's youth feared commitment, and he desired for Seiji and Shizuku to "commit to something" (quoted in Cavallaro 119). The Walt Disney Studio's English dub undermines the agency Miyazaki entrusts children with and their potential to "commit" to a better future.

Although some of the ecophilosophical films of Studio Ghibli underscore the improbability of humans peacefully coexisting with the natural world, other Ghibli films may be considered alongside *mono no aware* to suggest there remains beauty despite the world's inevitable passing. As the character of Osa, who is afflicted with a curse that damages his entire body, tells Ashitaka in *Princess Mononoke*: "Life is suffering. It is hard. The world is cursed. But still, you find reasons to keep living." Miyazaki expressed at a New York Film Festival press conference his confidence that children "understand intuitively that the world they have been born into is not a blessed world," and he refuses to patronize children by not showcasing the full realities of the world we inhabit (quoted in Edelstein). Miyazaki, Takahata, and the other directors at Studio Ghibli accept that the world will change, and they commonly find and convey that "there are good things and there are wonderful ways of experiencing and looking at the world" (*Turning Point* 175) despite this impermanence and strife in their films.

The concept of *mono no aware* or appreciation of impermanence can also be understood in Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron*. Miyazaki's most recent film centers on the protagonist Mahito processing the death of his birth mother and accepting his mother's sister, Natsuko, as his new mother. At the end of the film, Mahito refuses the wizard's offer to overtake the duty of balancing the blocks. The wizard suggests that Mahito will be safe from the evils of the world in the tower. The wizard questions why Mahito would return to a world of malice and human greed, but Mahito does not desire to escape the reality of "malice" in the world. The scar on Mahito's head, as Mahito explains, represents his own capability for malice. Mahito accepts that the world is cursed and desires to experience the beauty of the world in tandem with his loved ones despite the potential to witness the suffering that coexists. As the tower collapses, although Mahito warns his mother Hime of her fate to die in the hospital fire, she proclaims to Mahito, "Fire doesn't scare me" and "I'll be lucky to have you [as my son]," showcasing her acceptance of mortality as she enters the door to her own timeline without regret. After Mahito leaves the tower, the heron convinces Mahito to forget about his time in the heron's phantasmagoric world and move on with his life as "forgetting is normal." The acceptance of mortality and ideas of letting go, markedly feared in the endings of the Hollywood ecocritical animated films examined in this article, are commonplace in Ghibli films.

The appreciation of earth's ephemeral nature demonstrated in *The Boy and the Heron* aligns closely with sentiments expressed by Miyazaki about the fate of the studio in the Studio Ghibli documentary *The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*. When the director, Sunada Mami, asks Miyazaki if he is worried about the future of the studio, he responds:

"The future is clear. It's going to fall apart. I can already see it. What's the use worrying? It's inevitable. 'Ghibli' is just a random name I got from an airplane. It's only a name." (*The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness*)

After Miyazaki says this, he gazes at the field in the foreground and smiles, noting "how pretty" it is. Miyazaki acknowledges that Studio Ghibli will inevitably fall apart, and there is no use holding onto its crumbling tower, just as the wizard tells Mahito in *The Boy and the Heron*: "Build your own tower."

Regardless of the fate of Studio Ghibli, Studio Ghibli's marked history of radical ecophilosophy will continue to inspire animators globally.

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