Girls in the Ecological Crisis: Studio Ghibli and Ecofeminism

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Humanity's relation to the environment in the present time, marked by climate change, anthropogenic ecological catastrophes and the rising awareness of the complex intertwinement of the human and the natural, is a fertile field of thematisation also for film production. The film form that some theoreticians believe to be especially apt for the examination of ecological topics and the study of the ecological discourse is animation. Ursula K. Heise argues that animation inherently promotes animistic and post-humanistic ideas already due to its technology (the animation of inanimate images) and conventions, for, with its depiction of autonomous and active non-human beings, it "invite[s] the viewer to see humans as only one of many manifestations of liveliness, intentionality, and agency".[1] Even though Western popular animation often tackles ecological problems, it only occasionally doubts the accepted anthropocentric conventions of shallow ecology;[2] that is why ecocriticism seeks alternative and more complex ecological ethoses in animation in Japan.

1 Heise, Ursula K. 2014: "Plasmatic Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film". *Public Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 305.

2 The term "shallow ecology" refers to the anthropocentric approach to nature and ecology based on the dualism of mind and matter – the human mind *versus* natural matter, which thus considers human beings as a separate entity in relation to nature; placing them hierarchically "above" nature, which is subject to humans or which humans have to subject. The opposite term, "deep ecology", is used for ecological approaches that go beyond such

Ever since the animators and directors Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata co-founded Studio Ghibli in 1985 together with the producer Toshio Suzuki, the films the studio has produced, especially those made by Miyazaki himself, have almost programmatically thematised environmental and ecological topics. At the same time, Miyazaki and his collaborators often choose as the central characters of their ecological fairytales (primarily young, usually adolescent) women and girls, who, in the course of the film, while searching for their identity, also establish and question their relation to the environment, nature and the ecosystem in which they are placed, while facing the consequences that industrialisation, urbanisation, a destructive war and/or technological progress has had for them. The films that follow this formula, including, for example, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Kaze no Tani no Naushika, 1984),[3] *Princess Mononoke* (Mononoke-hime, 1997), *Ponyo* (Gake no Ue no Ponyo, 2008) and *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (Kaguya-hime no Monogatari, 2013), are often celebrated, among both the critics and the general audience, for their positive and inspiring depictions of women and nature.

In Studio Ghibli's oeuvre, the concepts of nature and the concepts of womanhood connect in complex and contradictory ways. This lends the possibility of analysing Ghibli films through the united theoretical lenses of ecocriticism and feminist criticism. Precisely this (symbolic and philosophical) connection between the imaginaries of Woman and Nature is the mental construct that the theoretical field of ecofeminism examines and questions. So are Studio Ghibli films actually feminist and ecological or even ecofeminist?

Feminist criticism, ecocriticism – feminist ecocriticism, ecofeminist criticism?

The fundamental premise of ecofeminist theories could be understood as the idea that the "*repression of women and the abuse of nature are inseparably connected as both are dominated by the mechanisms of patriarchy, capitalism and environmental degradation*".[4] The common element of the feminist and the ecological movement is the struggle for the liberation from cultural and economic shackles that keep women and nature in a subordinate position, where they are subject to social exploitation.[5] This pattern

an anthropocentric view. Cf. Hoy, Terry. 2000: *Toward a Naturalistic Political Theory: Aristotle, Hume, Dewey, Evolutionary Biology, and Deep Ecology*. Westport: Praeger.

3 Even though *Nausicaä of the Valley* precedes the establishment of Studio Ghibli and was produced by Topcraft, the studio gave the creative control over the film entirely to Miyazaki as the director and Takahata as the producer. It was precisely the success of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* that enabled them to establish Studio Ghibli and employ most of the artists that had worked for Topcraft. The film can "in spirit" be considered Studio Ghibli's first film; the studio itself includes it in most lists and collections of their films.

4 Dobovšek, Zala. 2023: "Krvave sledi ekofeminizma". Accessible at: https://www.neodvisni.art/refleksija/2023/03/krvave-sledi-ekofeminizma/, accessed on 26 August 2024.

5 Žebovec, Nataša. 2009: *Pojavljanje radikalnih zelenih teorij v okoljskem diskurzu*. Ljubljana: UL FDV, p. 38.

of a simultaneous domination over nature and women can be observed in the entire hegemonic Western culture, while, with colonisation and later global economy, it has also been transferred to non-Western societies,[6] including those whose philosophies are (at least theoretically) more inclined to an egalitarian treatment of women and/or non-human nature (for example, traditional Japanese philosophy, especially Shinto, which has also had a significant impact on Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli films, emphasises the respect for nature and fellow human beings regardless of their gender as a fundamental value).[7] Karen Warren claims that the unjustified domination over nature is just as much a feminist issue as equality (of all people or, more broadly, also animals) and all forms of discrimination according to one's inherent characteristics (for example, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion). According to Warren, the ecofeminist approach means that we use gender analysis as the basis of understanding the connections between these forms of oppression, which enables us to describe and analyse the problem; but she stresses that that does not mean that gender oppression is the most important as the point is precisely in searching for the connections between all systems of human domination.[8] A holistic approach is therefore needed to achieve social and ecological justice, for different forms of domination co-impact global and local ecologies, which requires a comprehensive overcoming of the existing hegemonic ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism. Ecofeminism recognises the status of nature as the neglected Other in relation to humans. In the same way, in feminist theory, Simone de Beauvoir already pointed out the definition of woman as the Other in relation to man: "*[Woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man, and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute; she is the Other.*"[9] The domination of the primarily constructed subject over the Other does not end within human societies but is also extended to the domination over non-human nature. So: a human being is the Subject, they are the Absolute, nature is the Other.

This inevitably also leads to the alienation of humans from nature – the more nature is constructed as the Other, the more humans feel distant and alienated from it, especially in contemporary capitalist, industrialised and technologised society. When humans feel alienated from nature, they can become apathetic to it and do not recognise its value except for its value as raw material or a resource that they can use or exploit; but precisely such a view leads to the normalisation

6 *Ibid*.

7 That does not mean that the traditional Japanese society was any more ecological or any less patriarchal than Western societies: cf. Maruyama, Masatsugu. 2000: "Deconstructive Ecofeminism: A Japanese Critical Interpretation". *Worldviews*, vol. 4, no. 1.

8 Warren, Karen J. 2000: *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., p. 1–2.

9 Beauvoir, Simone de. 1949: *The Second Sex*. London: Penguin, p. 5.

of the domination over and exploitation of nature, which ecofeminism struggles against.[10]

A deeper definition of a unified perspective of ecofeminism turns out to be impossible as the term brings together a multiplicity of phenomenal and theoretical aspects, which are often contradictory and, in some circles, strongly problematised.[11] As an umbrella term, ecofeminism encompasses, among other things, aspects of "materialist" ecofeminism, which, in its consideration of all human and non-human beings as equal, complements its analysis with Marxism;[12] "spiritual" ecofeminism, which focuses on the alleged spiritual, metaphysical connection between women and nature, often referring to the worshiping of a Goddess or Goddesses, animism and holistic spirituality;[13] "vegetarian" ecofeminism, which focuses on the liberation of animals and also sees the patriarchal pattern of devaluing "inferior" bodies in the use of animal bodies for human consumption;[14] and "postcolonial" ecofeminism, which examines the connections between imperialism and colonialism and the exploitation of nature and gendered (human and non-human) bodies, especially in the global South. By joining these various aspects, ecofeminism strives for an intersectional analysis of numerous forms of oppression and the way they are connected with the exploitation of non-human nature and natural resources;[15] which is why it welcomes a diversity and a plurality of voices, whereby it endeavours for a global application of its theories.

As a critical strategy in the field of literature, culture and cinema, ecofeminism has been gradually establishing itself only in the last two decades, building a hybrid model in dialogue with ecofeminist theories, ecocriticism, literary criticism and ecological

10 Cf. Vogel, Steven. 1988: "Marx and Alienation From Nature". *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 367–387. In the paper, the author applies Marx's alienation theory to the alienation of humans from the environment and nature; in his view, ecological alienation is a symptom of economic alienation.

11 Ecofeminism is criticised as utopian because it has not established (according to the critics) any practically feasible strategies to achieve its goals; as universalistic because it supposedly overly generalises the traditions of various cultures regarding both gender and nature into only one mould; as essentialist because, in its early period, it often leaned (only) on biological sex in its analysis of womanhood and due to its scepticism regarding contemporary science, in which some ecofeminists observe an (unobjective) reproduction of Western patriarchal values. For a comprehensive critique of ecofeminism, cf. Sargisson, Lucy. 2001: "What's Wrong with Ecofeminism". *Environmental Politics*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 52–64.

12 See, for example, works by Maria Mies in Germany, Vandana Shiva in India (who also combines Marxist analysis with postcolonial aspects), Ariel Salleh in Australia and Ana Isla in Peru.

13 See, for example, the pagan ecofeminist activist Starhawk in the US.

14 See, for example, works by Greta Gaard and Carol J. Adams. For a comprehensive study of vegetarian ecofeminism, see Miler, Lucija. 2016: *Vegetarijanski ekofeminizem*. Ljubljana: UL FF.

15 Gaard, Greta. 2011: "Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism". *Feminist Formations*, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 28.

theories[16], a model that gives critics "*a special lens through which they can investigate /.../ the ways representations of nature are linked with representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality,*" which is supposed to enable a shift towards a more comprehensive environmental ethics.[17] Ecofeminist criticism of culture and art is based primarily on the deconstruction of the mental construct according to which the concepts of woman, womanhood and nature are symbolically connected (as can already be seen in the conceptual connection of nature with a mother in the metaphorical constructs Mother Nature, Mother Earth and the like): in the dualistic conceptual system, men are associated with the rational, logos, the spiritual and therefore culture and civilisation, while women are associated with motherhood, corporeality, sexuality and thereby with nature and the "natural". As the earliest ecofeminists already pointed out, this connection is merely a social construct of course and not a biological reality: "*Woman is not 'in reality' any closer to (nor farther from) nature than man.*"[18] Ecofeminism does not see these associations as necessarily inherently problematic; the problem is that these concepts are hierarchised, so men and culture are seen as more important than women and nature, hierarchically "above" them. In 1972 already, the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner argued that the universal devaluation of women could be explained by the hypothesis that women are seen as closer to "lower" aspects of the natural world and, in the cultural imaginary, related to the "wildness" of nature, while men are seen as more closely related to the "higher" aspects of culture and civilisation.[19] According to Ortner, this connection originates directly in the female reproductive function. Due to the very corporeal process of giving birth (as opposed to the intellectual processes that are socially associated with men), which is specific to women,[20] and due to motherhood, which, according to Ortner, society does not see as work but as a woman's natural function to raise hierarchically "lower" natural beings (children, which, like animals, have not been socialised yet to function in the "human" cultural context and are therefore closer to non-human nature) into "higher" civilised beings

16 Among them, deep deep ecology, dark ecology and the like. Cf. Warren, Karen J., ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature.* Bloomington: Indiana UP.

17 Legler, Gretchen. 1997: "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism". In: Warren, Karen J., ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, p. 227.

18 Ortner, Sherry B. 1972: "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 28.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

20 Of course only cis women and not all women experience it, while, at the same time, some transsexual men and non-binary persons can experience it. Precisely because they overlook such nuances, Ortner and early ecofeminism, which followed her example, are often accused of an essentialist view of gender; in absence of other explicitly expressed transphobic and otherwise exclusionary beliefs, we can also understand that only as an overlooked fact and not a fundamental component of ecofeminist ideology. Ortner already points out that she refers to women not so much as a biological category but more as a social construction of womanhood (p. 28).

(people – men), women are placed in the function of mediators between the world of non-human nature and human (according to Ortner: male) civilisation, which, in the cultural conception, transcends nature; that is why women are "naturalised", that is, subject to exploitation comparable to that of nature. But while Ortner merely points out the binaries as a possible explanation for the subordinate position of women and nature in the social imaginary, contemporary ecofeminism tries to overcome and eliminate them in both life and art. In her *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics*, Catherine Roach examines the same connection between the concepts of motherhood and nature as a socially devalued category and critically applies it to the field of art and pop culture, which recreates this binary mode of representation; she criticises this mode because "*when women are seen as closer to nature than men, women are inevitably seen as less fully human than men*",[21] while, at the same time, these hierarchised depictions can deter both women and men from seeing themselves as (only one of the) manifestations of nature and thereby active participants of the ecosystem. Ecofeminist criticism recognises nature as a social construct that people create by the way we think about and represent it. In this, it refers especially to the theory of social ecology of Murray Bookchin, who argues that people have taken as "natural" many systems of domination and hierarchy that actually do not exist in nature; according to Bookchin, people understand nature as wild and brutal and therefore try to dominate and tame it. Such domination justifies the creation of hierarchies according to which people are above nature, men above women, certain races and ethnicities above others and so on. That is why we can see the common core of ecological and social problems precisely in such domination.[22] But, both in the broader social imaginary and in art, people have the power to construct nature as a free, autonomous subject and not an object dominated by humans – just as feminism endeavours for a social (re)construction of women as autonomous subjects not dominated by men. "*When we realise that the hierarchies and systems of domination in human societies are artificially created and not biological, we can act in a symbiosis with both other people and the rest of the natural world.*"[23] Ecofeminism thus sees nature as an equal partner to humanity, where men and women must be equal too,[24] and strives towards such depictions in art and cinema as well. (Such a depiction of nature is also in accord with the concept of animism, which is one of the fundamental components of Shinto, which many Ghibli films are inspired by.)

21 Roach, Catherine. 2003: *Mother/Nature: Popular Culture and Environmental Ethics*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, str. 56.

22 Bookchin, Murray. 2005: "Society and Ecology". In: Dryzek, John S. and Schlosberg, David, ed. *Debating the Earth: The Environmental Politics Reader.* New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 391–5.

23 Miler 2016, p. 9.

24 Merchant, Carolyn. 2005: *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. New York: Routledge, p. 107.

It is difficult to talk about "ecofeminist cinema" because filmmakers rarely explicitly express their ecofeminist beliefs or goals; but precisely Studio Ghibli films (especially *Princess Mononoke*) have, in pop culture, often been characterised as ecofeminist, probably precisely because they strive towards an equal depiction of human and non-human nature. Numerous films can, however, be analysed through the ecofeminist aspect; especially apt for this are sci-fi, dystopian and post-apocalyptic films in which the simultaneous processes of devaluing and destroying nature and humans are explicitly shown and usually at least to an extent problematised. Jhan Hochman explains that the representation of nature in cinema is important because "material and representational domination is reciprocal and double".[25] Cinematic depictions of nature dominated by humans, be they depictions of "wild", "untamed" nature that "causes" natural disasters, against which the human protagonists are struggling and which thus becomes an "active" agent of destruction and chaos, or monotonous and unimaginative presentations of nature as a "*two-dimensional backdrop to the human drama" also enable the interpretation of the real natural world surrounding us as "fit primarily for multiple manipulations and annihilations*".[26] In line with the symbolic connection between the concepts of Woman and Nature described above, we can conceive the cinematic depictions of the latter as female; as "good" (human-friendly) or "bad" (hostile to humans) Mother Nature.[27] As Cynthia Belmont points out in her analysis of disaster films, Mother Nature is a film construct that, precisely through the destructive potential of nature, links nature and gender in important ways: "*whether giant cockroach, shark, asteroid, or lava flow, she is as vivid a cultural fantasy as the human heroine who is her long-lost daughter.*"[28] In disaster films, (male) civilisation and culture must subjugate, tame and take power from both. The heroines of disaster films are, notes Belmont, (usually) educated, talented, accomplished and fulfilled in their careers; but even though they initially do not submit to the traditional expectations related to womanhood and a woman's "place" in society, by the end of the film, they lose, almost without exception, their authority and professional position, becoming powerless, passive, silent (or dead) victims and/or sexual objects, whereby the films implicitly advocate the aspect (antithetical to ecofeminism and feminism in general) that, for women, the "natural" state is to be weak, powerless and motherly.[29] But even though, like Western disaster films, (some) Studio Ghibli films also depict (eco)disasters, Ghibli's heroines are all but powerless or weak.

25 Quoted from Belmont, Cynthia. 2007: "Ecofeminism and the Natural Disaster Heroine". *Women's Studies*, vol. 36, no. 5, p. 352.

26 *Ibid*.

27 Cf. Roach 2003, who problematises such a view as anthropocentric because it evaluates nature only in relation to humans.

28 Belmont 2007, p. 352.

29 *Ibid*., pp. 357–69.

Humanity as part of the ecosystem: the visions of nature in Studio Ghibli film worlds

The ecological message of Studio Ghibli films is based on the idea of humanity as only one element of the broader natural world, which is one of the fundamental ecofeminist premises. Despite their fantastic, mythological-historical or post-apocalyptic disguise, Studio Ghibli films are always the images of our world; in their worlds, like in ours, human civilisation causes the destruction of entire ecosystems and they often examine the consequences of a lack of respect for the natural environment, which is a result of humanity placing itself hierarchically above nature and separating from it. Watching these films makes evident the thesis that the division between non-human "nature" and "humanity" or civilisation is merely a social construct.

Many Ghibli films could at first sight be characterised as animated (eco)disaster films. In *Ponyo*, a tsunami lays waste to the city where the protagonist Sōsuke lives. It is triggered by the natural imbalance caused by the titular fish-girl onyo with her uncontrolled magic – and indirectly by the human pollution of the oceans since Ponyo's magic is "awoken" precisely by her interest in the human world aroused by the waste discarded in her home ocean. In *Princess Mononoke*, we follow the intensification of the conflict between non-human nature, personified in intelligent deities (*kami*) and spirits (*yōkai*)[30] and the titular "princess Mononoke" – San (who is human but grew up in the forest and was raised by the mentioned non-human beings) and the industrialised society of Irontown. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, the post-apocalyptic nature, degraded to the radioactive rainforest named Sea of Decay, directly endangers the survival of people not only with radiation but also with the threatening gigantic mutated insects – *ohmus*, who kill people when enraged.[31]

But, in their representation of nature, these "disaster films" differ from the comparable Western films. In them, nature is not reified or anthropomorphised but is an entity in itself, one inextricably connected with humanity, humanity is part of it, yet nature is greater than humanity. In Ghibli films, preserving nature is not important due to nature's beauty – even though, with their aesthetically wonderful animation style, they often depict natural landscapes as visually stunning – or the cuteness of animals and animal-like beings that inhabit it; sometimes, they are outright ugly (like the primeval fish in *Ponyo*, *ohmus* in *Nausicaä* or monstrous boar gods in *Princess Mononoke*) and not only "useless" for humans but also dangerous. On the contrary,

30 The Japanese *kami* is usually translated into Slovenian as "god" or "deity" and the Japanese *yōkai* as "spirit" or "monster". But these translations are not accurate since the Japanese terms refer to specific Shinto concepts of supernatural beings, sometimes divine and sometimes monstrous, which represent certain aspects of nature, for example trees/forests (like *kodama* in *Princess Mononoke*), rivers (like the dragon Haku in *Spirited Away*) etc. Moreover, *mononoke* is a synonym of *yōkai*.

31 The film was also inspired by the literary series *The Earthsea Cycle* (1968—2001) by Ursula K. Le Guin, which is often praised as an example of ecofeminist literature.

nature in Ghibli films has an inherent value due to some sort of immanent animistic spirit, almost a soul, equal to (but not the same as) the human soul, that it is imbued with. Nature is not depicted as an alien, inherently endangering force like in disaster films or ecohorror, in which nature takes "revenge" against humanity for its abuses of it; yes, nature or its non-human inhabitants do react to human actions that endanger their survival (and the integrity of the natural world) but only in an attempt at their own preservation.

Moreover, in Studio Ghibli films, nature is not gendered like it is in Western representations. As Masatsugu Maruyama points out, the specific hierarchised association of women with nature (or nature with a mother) and men with culture, which ecofeminism problematises, is not present in Japanese culture like it is in the Western thought systems.[32] Most personifications of nature, such as *kami* and *yōkai*, do not have a specific gender. An interesting exception is the she-wolf Moro in *Princess Mononoke*, who is explicitly female and also San's bloodthirsty adoptive mother, but, despite its violent hostility towards people endangering the forest, Moro is also wise, loving, protective and caring, especially towards San. Moro thus merges and thereby transcends the archetypes of "good" or "bad" mother (Nature) and also the usual depictions of anthropomorphic animal characters as cute and gentle. In the Japanese original, she is dubbed by a male actor, which additionally complicates the dualistic associative model and the concept of gender in general as strictly binary.

Human protagonists also do not try to subjugate nature or beat it like in Western disaster films; that is done by the antagonists, such as Lady Eboshi in *Princess Mononoke*, who wants to tame nature by cutting down the sacred forest and using its wood as the (necessary) fuel for the ironworks, or the Imperial Princess Kushana in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, who wants to beat the forces of nature by using the omnidestructive bioweapon in the form of artificially created Giant Warriors, with whom people caused the apocalypse after which the film takes place. The motivation of these antagonists, however, is not revenge or some sort of inherent "evil" but their own survival and the defence of the people whose wellbeing they are in charge of – for Kushana, they are the inhabitants of her empire and, for Eboshi, primarily the female workers of Irontown, whom she had "saved" from the brothels of the nearby towns, which shows the conflict between humanity and nature in a more complex light than is usually the case with disaster films. The protagonists of these films appreciate nature not because of its use value for humans but because they recognise it (or, in the course of the film, come to recognise it) as their equal.

Most Ghibli animations do not have a non-ambivalently happy ending; the end of the film is only the starting point of a harmonious co-existence of people and nature.

32 Maruyama, Masatsugu. 2000: »Deconstructive Ecofeminism: A Japanese Critical Interpretation«. *Worldviews*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 21.

In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, the protagonist is revealed as the prophesised hero (initially assumed to be male) who can re-establish the balance in the ecosystem and reach peace with the *ohmus*, but, at that point, nature is still a radioactive jungle inhospitable to people and it is implied that people will have to invest a lot of effort to get back even an approximation of the initial state. In *Princess Mononoke*, the protagonist Ashitaka and San return the stolen head of the Deer God[33] and thus enable the restoration of the forest, but no longer as an ancient, sacred rainforest – now, we get a young forest of fresh afforestation, whereby the film shows the lasting consequences of human exploitation of nature; Ashitaka returns to the destroyed Irontown to rebuild it and, through his friendship with San, represent the connection between nature and civilisation, but this connection is also strained, without any promises of forgiveness and unconditional peace. These open and ambivalent endings are a large part of what makes Studio Ghibli films so effective in their ecological message, for they show the preservation of nature and humanity not as something that people could simply achieve through individual action but as a long process that demands cooperation, intentionality and effort.

In other Ghibli films, the artificially created dividing line between nature and civilisation is presented much less explicitly, not as a direct conflict between natural forces and human protagonists but as a pervading alienation of humanity from the environment, which the human characters do not even consciously consider, but is reflected in their apathy towards the natural world, which the protagonists must usually overcome, and in the industrialised, "civilised" worlds that they primarily inhabit and from which non-human nature is "exiled" to the margins. In *Spirited Away* (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi, 2001), the protagonist Chihiro learns how to overcome consumerism and greed that mark contemporary human society through the friendship and understanding she develops in relation to the dragon river god Haku and other spirits that represent various natural phenomena – especially interesting is the "stink spirit", a muddy being who later turns out to be the spirit of the polluted river, which Chihiro has to clean, thus cleaning the river. With a sense of responsibility and independence that she gains through her interactions with these (super)natural beings, she can escape the world of *kamis*, which we can interpret as her "return" to nature: at the end of the film, she notices for the first time the natural world that surrounds her and that she had previously ignored. In T*he Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, the transformation of the protagonist proceeds in the opposite direction – which can already be seen in the change of her childhood nickname Takenoko ("little bamboo"), which symbolises her connection with nature, to the much more formal title Princess Kaguya, which represents her integration into civilised culture. Her transformation from an innocent, ungendered child who, in a childlike manner,

33 In Japanese, *Shishigami* or *Deidarabotchi*, the main forest god or life force that has the power of giving and taking life.

marvels at and enthuses over nature, into a resigned and depressed young woman, who is forced by her familial duty and patriarchal expectations into a "civilised" existence in urban society, marked especially by materialism and alienation from nature (symbolised by her move from the rural environment to the city), is a reflection of contemporary (Japanese) capitalist society, which prioritises the drive towards economic mobility over an authentic existence in connection with nature.[34] Kaguya can live authentically only when she leaves the city, which constrains her, and literally returns to nature – the countryside covered with bamboo forests where she grew up.

Nausicaä, San, Ponyo, Kaguya: the lost daughters of Mother Nature

Studio Ghibli ecoanimations often – or even most often – centre on women; more precisely, young women that have a special connection with nature (or have to rediscover that connection in the course of the film) and are, in the plot, often placed in the role of a mediator in the conflict between the human and the natural world. The most obvious examples of such female characters are Nausicaä, San, Ponyo and Kaguya. All of them are symbolically, and some also literally, the lost daughters of Mother Nature (as Cynthia Belmont puts it), which they represent and to which they return. But these characters are characterised very differently and thus represent very different modes of connecting with nature.

Nausicaä is depicted as a pacifistic, loving, kind, caring and just ruler of the Valley of the Wind; she approaches beings such as *ohmus* gently, in an almost motherly manner (like when she saves a baby *ohmu*), and is very traditionally "feminine" in this; her physical appearance is also very cute and feminine in line with the *shōjo* archetype.[35] She responds to the destructiveness of humanity primarily by rejecting violence and wars but is by no means passive or weak in this. She is an independent, active and brave researcher, who fearlessly goes into the dangerous Sea of Decay and is not afraid to use weapons when necessary (when she uses a sward to kill the soldiers who murdered her father; even though she almost immediately regrets this violence), and an intelligent scientist, studying plants that she finds during her expeditions like a sort of proto-ecologist. She is also very self-sacrificing: for the benefit of the baby *ohmu*, she is prepared to step into the Acid Lake even though she will get even more hurt than she already is. In this, she merges both the "female" qualities of (self-)sacrifice and care and the "male" qualities of heroism and bravery. Of the protagonists under consideration, she is the most feminine but, with her "soft power", achieves just as much as the more androgynous Ghibli heroines.

34 Bryce, Mio and Davis, Jason. 2015: "The Tale of the Princess Kaguya". *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 140.

35 Napier, Susan J. 2001: *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 122. *Shōjo* in Japanese pop culture refers to the archetype of a young, usually cute, gentle, emotional heroine.

San, Miyazaki's perhaps most complex heroine, is even more deeply connected with nature than Nausicaä but in an (even) more emancipated way, much less in accord with the traditional female archetypes: San is by no means pacifistic or gentle but rather a wild girl, a warrior; she is bloodthirsty, violent and ruthless, like nature in its destructive capacity of a "bad" mother hostile to humans. She is also prepared to kill for her ecological goal (as when she tries to kill Lady Eboshi), but she is not prepared to conform to any expectations that society has of her as a woman or, generally, a human being. If Nausicaä, who was raised as a princess and accepts her social role, may still be influenced by the traditional modes of womanhood and female behaviour, San, raised in the wild, has not internalised such norms. San will always value nature and her own individuality more than the human world, in which she can observe quite thankless roles appointed to women. As Helen McCarthy writes: "*Her people are a wolf goddess and her subordinate sons. Her mother converses on equal terms with the forces of nature. How is she to fit into a society where women are grateful for factory work as a way out of prostitution?*"[36] Nevertheless, San is also capable of "female" gentleness (when she nurses the wounded Ashitaka) and deeply loves nature and its non-human beings and is exceptionally protective of them. Even though her appearance is more androgynous and less "cute" than Nausicaä's, she is still distinctly "female" in her physicality; Susan J. Napier argues that the blood on San's face after sucking poison from the wound in her mother's, that is, she-wolf Moro's side – one of the most famous images of the film, also used in most of the promotional materials – suggests menstrual blood and "primordial", "aggressive" female sexuality, which is "more ominous than erotic".[37] Even though the female inhabitants of Irontown insult her and do not accept her, the story depicts San's non-conformism as acceptable or even positive and San never needs to submit or change. It is true that, the way she is, she cannot function in human society, but she does not even want to and why should she? Her choice to live freely in the forest is shown as totally legitimate.

The fish-gorl Ponyo is the daughter of the goddess and queen of the ocean Granmamare, so literally the daughter of a personified sea; and even though she is not human, she is primarily a little girl, who marvels at every new experience of both nature and human civilisation like a child. Ponyo is actually the most androgynous of the heroines under consideration (San might be her only "competition" in this regard). In this, she is similar to Chihiro in *Spirited Away*; both are characterised less by their sex and more by their childlike curiosity and their gaining of independence is primarily that of a child learning to function in the world of socialised adults. In

36 McCarthy, Helen. 2018: "Teenage Wildlife: *Princess Mononoke* and Hayao Miyazaki's Theory of the Feminine". In: Denison, Rayna, ed. *Princess Mononoke: Understanding Studio Ghibli's Monster Princess*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 102.

37 Napier 2001, p. 183.

her exploration (of herself and the environment), Ponyo is allowed the same amount of social freedom as her boy friend Sōsuku – at least when she escapes the supervision of her overly protective father Fujimoto. Her story in the film begins and ends at the age of five, but if we envision an adult Ponya, we can imagine her being just as strong, independent and wilful as her mother.

It is completely different with Kaguya. Princess Kaguya or Takenoko is "born" out of a bamboo shoot and is thus inherently related with the natural world. Like San and Ponyo, she is also an androgynous, "wild" child of nature, carelessly playing with the animals that live there, without being burdened by the gender-based expectations of human society. But when she grows up into a beautiful young girl, the patriarchal pressures (enforced by the literal patriarch, her (adoptive) father) begin to affect her: she has to conform to the social beauty standards (she has to lose weight, pluck her eyebrows, blacken her teeth, dress in luxurious and feminine clothes that restrict her movement) and behavioural standards (she must no longer playfully roll on the ground with cats, she must not freely go on adventures in nature, she must not laugh too loudly, she must no longer socialise with boys in a carefree manner…), she has to graciously tolerate unwanted courting and (eventually) get married (to a socially "suitable", that is, wealthy and aristocratic suitor of course); in short, she has to be a proper, graceful, quiet and respectable princess, for whom "wild" behaviour is shameful. In order to meet this standard, she has to repress her adventurous spirit and her connection with (more primordial, wilder, freer) non-human nature, which pushes her into a state of increasing despair. It is precisely the weight of these expectations of a "civilised" patriarchal society, which she cannot and, at some point, no longer wants to meet, that makes Kaguya renounce such a life and return to her (super)natural roots. In *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, the feminist narrative of liberation from patriarchal social norms is the most explicit compared to the other Ghibli films under consideration; at the same time, it is inextricably connected with her return to nature, in unity with which she grew up and which she longs for during her stay in the urban city environment.

Studio Ghibli's female protagonists are the main bearers of the ecological messages of their films: they are the ones who are the most deeply connected with non-human nature and feel the consequences of the destruction of the environment or the alienation from it most profoundly. But in these films, the relation between women/nature and men/culture is dehierarchised. We could even argue that, with the placement of the natural world in the position of the ultimate force that must be respected and women in the main roles and the positions of power, it is rather women and nature that are "above" men and civilisation, but since the films are mostly shown through the perspective of human characters, whose wellbeing the viewers care about, and because Miyazaki and Takahata also create complex and likeable male characters, the hierarchies are not only inverted but also eliminated.

Kushana, Eboshi: what about older women?

Describing Studio Ghibli films as "feminist" is a bit complicated due to their depictions of older women, who – like princess Kushana in *Nausicaä* and Lady Eboshi in *Princess Mononoke* – are often placed in the function of antagonists. They do occupy the positions of power as the leaders of their militarised and industrialised communities, which, on the surface, can be read as a "feminist" gesture (they are literally *girlbosses*). But precisely because they lead society into conflict with nature, they represent the most destructive tendencies of humanity.

Kushana and Eboshi are depicted as very beautiful but at the same time masculinised women. More than a princess, Kushana is a military commander – for most of the film, she is also dressed in a very "male" armour and until she takes off her helmet for the first time, we do not even know that she is a woman – fighting alongside her male subjects with very violent tactics (she is even prepared to use the fantasy equivalent of a nuclear weapon). Eboshi performs a similar "male" function of the forewoman at the ironworks and even though she dresses more "femininely" than Kushana, she too, when the moment for military action comes, fights on the front lines (when she kills the Deer God by her own hand). Both are cold, emotionally unavailable, relentless, with an iron will, sometimes cruel and always completely alienated from the natural world and hostile to it. In rare moments, we get a glimpse behind their mask of a strong warrior and see complex feelings of a fear of the natural forces they are fighting and the duty to and affection for their people, even traces of an internal conflict. In her almost maternal struggle for the outcasts, lepers and women that she employs, thereby offering them a better life, Eboshi can even be read as a protofeminist. But despite this and even though viewers can empathise with their motivations, their goals and tactics are doubtlessly presented as misguided and harmful in line with the ecological message of the films. That is why we can also read their rejection of traditionally female gender roles as wrong in the eyes of the film plot, an "unnatural" perversion of the "natural" role of adult women. In their ecofeminist analysis of *Princess Mononoke*, Wendi Sierra et al. note that Lady Eboshi's character arc follows the pattern of the heroines of disaster films as described by Cynthia Belmont; the same could be claimed for Kushana. Both are defeated, "subjugated", also physically mutilated (Kushana loses her arm and narrowly escapes death in an attack of the *ohmus*, while Eboshi almost dies in her attempt to kill the Deer God, while she-wolf Moro bites off her right arm in their clash) at the end of the film, which researchers read as a "punishment" for transgressing the social norms of womanhood.[38] But such a reading exclusively through gender overlooks the ecological point: the narration "punishes" the antagonists not so much because of their nonconformist gender expression but more because of their crimes against nature. In the

38 Sierra, Wendi et al. 2015: "Nature, Technology, and Ruined Women: Ecofeminism and Princess Mononoke". *The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal*, vol. 1, no. 5, pp. 45–47.

spirit of Ghibli's ambivalent ends, there remains the possibility, despite their physical defeat, of their reintegration into a more tolerant society that is more connected with nature – through the failure of their technologised, militaristic vision, they gain a new respect for nature, which they could approach less violently in the future.

While girls and teenagers in Ghibli films can become free and independent, adult emancipated women can only be antagonists. This would not be questionable – we could even argue that it is feminist to show women in all their complexity, including their capacity for evil – if Studio Ghibli offered a broader range of possible modes of existence for older women; but Ghibli films lack modes that go beyond the typified roles of mothers and grandmothers.

What can Ghibli teach us?

Studio Ghibli ecoanimations merge ecological fantasies about the reestablishment of the neglected connection between people and nature, but they also emphasise that the path to a sustainable, ecologically conscious coexistence is long, that it demands human sacrifices and efforts and must be based primarily on the solidarity among humans and solidarity with our non-human fellow beings and the environment. They appeal to us less on an intellectual level and more on an imaginative level, thus enabling us to envision different, less domination- and oppression-based worlds. Susan Napier writes that *Princess Mononoke* mourns the loss of a world ruled not by patriarchy and human civilisation but by nature and at the same time "*offers an alternative, heterogeneous, and female-centered vision of Japanese identity for the future*",[39] in which humanity abandons its obsession with technological progress and economic growth and returns to its ecological roots. Even though Napier applies her analysis only to one film, we can extend this thought to all Studio Ghibli ecoanimations under consideration, which, with their models of paths towards a symbiotic co-existence, can serve as a conception of a possible, better future of the Anthropocene.

39 Napier 2001, p. 176.

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