

Lost for Words: Constructing Human-Nature Relations through Color in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

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Abstract

Because of the failure of both academic and literary language in providing a comprehensible account of the contemporary, environmental crises of the Anthropocene, this paper explores alternative, non-linguistic storytelling methods characteristic of animation for bringing awareness and understanding of ecological issues

to a broader public. It will do so by focusing on Hayao Miyazaki's film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), in order to investigate how color, as a visual narrative tool, can provide a powerful medium for portraying the complexity of transcorporeal entanglements, and consequently problematizing the human/non-human binary.

In his book *Defiant Earth* (2017), Clive Hamilton delves into the epoch of the Anthropocene¹ and states that the increasing body of scientific evidence towards climate change and its consequences have a paralyzing effect on society. He posits that this collective paralysis has resulted in the troubling “absence of a sense of the tragedy” in relation to the present-day ecological crises, an absence which he considers to be “the greatest tragedy of all” (Hamilton n.p.). It is, therefore, not surprising that Hamilton raises the question of how we can “understand the miserable failure of contemporary thinking to come to grips with what now confronts us” (Hamilton n.p.; see also Latour 8-12). In doing so, he engages in a dialogue with other scholars who have identified a similar problem; Bruno Latour, for instance, states that, since modernity, humanity does not possess “the mental and emotional repertoire to deal with such a vast scale of events” (1), and Amitav Ghosh believes that our failure to respond to the ongoing climate crisis “goes hand-in-hand with a crisis of imagination and culture, which stems from the same limitations ... that underlie modernity” (Yoneyama 251). Subsequently, in response to this crisis, theorists such as Donna Haraway have attempted to formulate solutions, often placing emphasis on the importance of narratives, as she asserts that “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities” of the various temporalities and spatialities belonging to the Anthropocene in order to spark fundamental change (160; see also Latour 8-12). This sentiment was also increasingly shared by authors, as in the past 50 years, (creative) writing on the human experience gradually started to include these contemporary environmental issues (Coulouma 159). Yet, as Nikolaj Schultz argues, even writers often “lack a language to understand what is happening” (Schultz n.p.). However, despite this perceived failure of language, both literary and academic, to provide a comprehensible and meaningful account of the environmental issues facing the planet, alternative methods of communicating may still prove useful in bringing this awareness to a broader public, which can open up discussions about

¹ Here, the term ‘Anthropocene’ is used to denote the geological epoch in which human beings have become a geological force, causing environmental change (Untea 873, 875). For further information concerning the Anthropocene, please see Hamilton’s book *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (2017).

how stories can nevertheless play a role in attaining this essential comprehension when words are insufficient to encompass its significance and complexity.

This paper aims to engage with this question and will analyze the 1984 animated film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (hereafter *Nausicaä*) by Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, particularly by exploring how Miyazaki's use of color functions as an alternative, non-linguistic narrative vehicle for reflecting on, communicating and criticizing the destructive capacity of humanity.² In doing so, I will shed new light on the ways in which this work can be said to make use of a new form of "ecological storytelling" (Coulouma 160; Miller 160); a label very much applicable to Miyazaki's work in terms of how it oftentimes portrays the entanglement of the human and natural world. This paper will, therefore, establish how Miyazaki communicates humanity as a destructive force in his animation by using the visual, narrative tool of color in a way that foregrounds the complex, transcorporeal intertwinement of the human with the non-human, and consequently blurs the associated binary between good and evil. Thus, overall, I will illustrate how the visual storytelling of animation can provide a powerful medium for expressing the current ecological crisis and humanity's role in it, where words alone prove insufficient.

Miyazaki's Ecological Storytelling

In his film *Nausicaä*, Miyazaki portrays humanity's ongoing struggle in a changed world after the destructive Seven Days of Fire caused by humanity's technological weapons, called 'Great Warriors', which took place a millennium before the film's temporal setting. At the start of the narrative, it becomes clear that this catastrophe has permanently altered both nature and natural life as the widespread pollution has

² *Nausicaä's* post-apocalyptic world was first introduced to the Japanese public as a predominantly black-and-white manga series under the same name that ran from 1982-1994, written and illustrated by Miyazaki, who, because of its success, adapted the first 16 chapters into the animated film of 1984. While both the manga and the animated adaptation of *Nausicaä* provide insights into Miyazaki's standpoints concerning the global climate crisis, I will focus on the animated film due to its complex utilization of color, accessibility, popularity, and prominence as a cultural artefact.

led to the growth of the Sea of Decay, a toxic fungi forest that cleanses the pollution from the soil yet expels fumes fatal to humans. The film's protagonist, Princess Nausicaä, resides with her people in the Valley of the Wind, but soon their valley is attacked by the Tolmekian empire that strives to "resurrect the Earth" by using a Great Warrior to completely burn away the Sea of Decay (*Nausicaä* 00:35:40-00:36:33). Consequently, the Valley becomes swept into a war raging between the empires of Pejite and the Tolmekia, who, in their warfare, end up using the insect population to cause further destruction.

The real-life inspiration for both *Nausicaä* and Miyazaki's later film *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is the Japanese Yakushima Forest, a world heritage site that has some of the oldest cedar trees, but has been greatly reduced in size over the past decades due to human interference (Coulouma 161). As such, Miyazaki's films can be interpreted as a critique on human's disastrous effects on natural life; *Nausicaä* in particular envisions issues similar to those that contemporary society is facing now, thereby likewise representing a situation in which humankind finds itself at a crossroads where its anthropocentric interests intersect with the welfare of the environment (161). Furthermore, the film seems to parallel real-life events in several other ways, most notably in terms of its post-apocalyptic world. For example, the catastrophic Seven Days of Fire and the subsequent emergence of the forest's poisonous ecosystem have been suggested to bear a striking resemblance to a vision of a world consumed by nuclear warfare and a subsequent nuclear winter (Akimoto 54-6). On the other hand, Denise Nunes has suggested that the inspiration for the Sea of Decay's toxicity stems from the Minamata Bay mercury poisoning disaster of 1956 (84). After this disaster, both humans and aquatic life were found with high levels of mercury in their system, creating a shared and, as Nunes calls it, transcorporeal toxicity (transcorporeality will be discussed more in-depth below) (84). However, contrasted to the affected humans, the contaminated marine life adapted and absorbed the poison, thereby illustrating the resilience of natural life in a way that mirrors the adaptability of animal and insect life in *Nausicaä* (84).

Within recent scholarship, *Nausicaä* as well as later works, such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* (2001), have often been analyzed in the context of their environmental and political themes. Especially the latter two have received much scholarly attention due to their incorporation of elements of Shintō³ and Miyazaki's unique philosophy of critical animism (Yoneyama 252-4; Heise 302-6; Reinders 2). Shoko Yoneyama, in particular, has applied this theoretical lens to *Nausicaä* and has argued that Miyazaki developed this new form of animism, which diverges from the traditional and nationalistic animist discourse of Japan, over the course of its production (254).⁴ In line with this personal philosophy, Miyazaki's films often depict one vital force of life without distinguishing between the natural and spirit world, thus removing the "hierarchical dualisms between human and nature, material and spiritual and European and other" (260). Moreover, Yoneyama argues that this animism has the ability to "re-enchant his audiences with a sense of spirituality that eschews the dogmas and orthodoxies of organized religions and politics" (254).

This is all reflected in the three key components of Miyazaki's animism, which include "depiction[s] of nature with agency" (Yoneyama 253), reflections on "intangibile cultural heritage" that distinguishes itself from Shintō, and his rejection of the Western binaries (253-4). His animated films, therefore, allow for both the incorporation of his philosophy and the creation of a form of expression that allows him "to connect his audience with his ideas about humanity's relationship to the natural world" (Morgan 173). Furthermore, Flore Coulouma argues that he, like many other science fiction film makers, chooses to

³ Shintō is Japan's indigenous religion and centres on the worship of various gods, known as kami, which are believed to inhabit natural phenomena. Therefore, one of the main objectives of Shintō can be argued to include maintaining a harmonious relationship with all forms of natural life. However, it is essential to note that providing a singular definition of Shintō is nearly impossible, as the practices of Shintō differ in each region, and the connotation of concepts, such as kami and the overarching musubi life force, cannot be sufficiently translated to English. For further information, I suggest the overview of the Shintō worldview offered by James W. Boyd and Ron G. Williams in "Japanese Shintō: An Interpretation of a Priestly Perspective" (2005).

⁴ According to Yoneyama, Miyazaki rejects the national, Japanese discourse of animism, as it has substantial ideological and political implications and is mainly based on the Shintō state ideology (253-4).

foreground depictions of monstrous creatures, death and decay, as created by mankind, in the hope that such “representations [...] in the age of environmental endangerment will help awaken consciences and [ultimately] reconcile humans and nature” (169).

Within Miyazaki’s body of work, *Nausicaä* occupies an exceptional position as it, unlike his other animated films, does not employ what Ursula K. Heise calls “a staple of animation,” namely humanizing the non-human characters by allowing them to speak or act like humans in their visual representations (308). In that way, animation “can usefully be understood as an aesthetic framework in which such visions of non-human agency have been playfully explored since long before new materialist theories arose” (308). However, *Nausicaä*’s animation fundamentally differs from this approach as it communicates such non-human agencies in alternative ways: instead of giving the non-humans a voice of their own, Miyazaki utilizes the non-linguistic tool of color to visualize their interconnection and interaction with humans. Moreover, by initiating the film through a predominantly human experience, *Nausicaä* becomes a guide for the viewer, who illustrates and communicates the nuances of the human/non-human dynamic and its associated good/evil binary, which have been colorfully integrated in the film’s visual story.

Transcorporeal Color-Entanglements between the Human and Non-Human

Previous research on Miyazaki’s films has focused primarily on how his movies depict and reflect on the present-day concerns regarding environmental issues. One such scholar is Gwendolyn Morgan, who in her article “Creatures in Crisis” (2015), argues that Miyazaki’s films often showcase conflicting images and ideas about nature to help the viewer better understand the complexity of his individual role in the Anthropocene (172-3). In Miyazaki’s work, humanity’s relationship with nature is generally severely fragmented, oftentimes due to the negative consequences of human behavior on its natural surroundings that manifest themselves as ecological disasters, toxic chemicals in the food

chain, or oil spills (183). In essence, Miyazaki's films critique the power imbalance between humans and the non-human by arguing against human exceptionalism, which Stacy Alaimo defines as the viewpoint that considers the environment as a blank slate for the gain of humanity, disconnecting humankind from the consequences of its alterations ("Oceanic" 133; "Transcorporeality" 435-6). As she elaborates in her "Oceanic Origins" (2016), such anthropocentric perspectives of, for example, the ocean as a mere dumping ground that disperses waste into oblivion, have caused a sense of alienation that has separated the human from the ocean and its ecological processes, which has, in turn, resulted in impaired biodiversity, particularly due to the increase in plastic pollution ("Oceanic" 113, 137). Moreover, by stressing the agentic capacity of things and human interconnectedness, Alaimo demonstrates that this plastic pollution acts as "man's surrogate, swimming with the fishes and doing harm" (Moore, as quoted in Alaimo's "Oceanic" 138), thereby entangling humans in "ghastly nets of responsibility" (138). With this theory of, what she calls, transcorporeality, Alaimo illustrates that humans cannot detach themselves from the environment but are caught in an entanglement in which the boundaries between human bodies and natural, non-human life are not fixed but constantly renegotiated. The environment is, therefore, not a passive backdrop to human activity, but plays an active role in the shaping of human bodies and identities (112-3).

This is not the first article that brings Miyazaki's films in connection with Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, as other scholars have already illustrated the way transcorporeal entanglements have been represented in films such as *Princess Mononoke* (Daniels-Lerberg and Lerberg 66-8). Similar research has been done on the manga version of *Nausicaä*, most notably by Nunes, who argues that the toxicity of the post-apocalyptic world, initially caused by the pollution of the old world, is interconnected with all aspects of *Nausicaä*'s world, as even the human bodies have become containers for this toxicity (86-7). In her research, Nunes has looked at the heroine Nausicaä and the consequences of her "trans-corporeal immersion in the world," as this allows her to "go beyond mere human morality" (84). However, while Nunes's analysis of

the manga touches on some of the entanglements that are also present in the animated version of *Nausicaä* due to the overlap in content, the difference in medium makes her observations not entirely sufficient for an analysis of the movie adaptation; particularly Miyazaki's use of color in the movie is a visual tactic that is not present in the original black-and-white manga, one that adds a new layer of meaning to the manga's linguistic clarifications of the relationship between human and non-human life. By using color, Miyazaki further problematizes the human-exceptionalist viewpoint of the characters in *Nausicaä* while also exploring the transcorporeal relationship between the various represented ecosystems.

Of central importance to the movie is Miyazaki's depiction of the Sea of Decay and the Valley of the Wind as he utilizes two distinct color schemes to signify their oppositional realities: the alien natural life of the Sea of Decay is portrayed in cool blue hues (00:04:49-00:08:58; 00:52:47-00:59:30; 01:04:18-01:10:20), while the Valley of the Wind has warm, green and natural, earthy tones, often red and orange, which are used for the buildings and scenery (00:16:00-00:18:47). While the difference between the ecosystems' colors itself already creates a binary between the insect-populated Sea of Decay and the human valley, this opposition is further strengthened by the journey of Nausicaä's mentor, the nomad and warrior Yupa, as he ventures from the forest to the village through a desert, which acts as a symbolic representation of the vast wasteland that illustrates the supposed distance between these two ecosystems (00:12:39-00:16:00). This emphasis on distance fortifies the belief that the forest and the Valley are two entirely separate systems with little to no influence on each other.

However, despite this visual and physical separation, the Sea of Decay and the Valley of the Wind remain unmistakably intertwined below the surface. This is most prominently conveyed when Nausicaä explains to Yupa that the plants living in the Sea of Decay are not in themselves toxic, but that their toxicity comes from the ground in which they are rooted (00:41:40-00:43:18). The spread of the toxic fungi to the village also illustrates that the soil of the Valley is equally toxic as that on which the Sea of Decay grows; distance is, therefore, not keeping the

toxic forest away (00:29:20-00:29:40; 01:13:50-01:16:19). Furthermore, after saving Prince Asbel of Pejite from an insect attack, Nausicaä awakens in the forest underneath the Sea of Decay and learns that the toxic trees “grew to cleanse a world polluted by humans” (01:09:20-01:09:27). Most prominently, the Sea of Decay purifies the water from the wells in the Valley, thereby, in fact, keeping humankind alive (00:41:40-00:43:18; 01:07:00-01:07:40; 01:09:12-01:10:26). Thus, by visually and linguistically showcasing the entanglements of *Nausicaä*'s post-apocalyptic world, Miyazaki conveys the far-reaching effects of the pollution of the previous civilization and problematizes the presumed distance between the two distinctively colored worlds.

These physical instances of toxicity and pollution are not the only entanglements that are depicted in the film; Miyazaki's animation also allows for the visibility of a form of spiritual pollution through his use of the color red, which visualizes an otherwise invisible transcorporeal relationship between humans and non-humans. This type of transcorporeality is related to the Shintō beliefs and practices of Japan, as James Boyd and Ron Williams state, in which “pollution is [conceived of as] dust that collects on a mirror; it inhibits our ability to see clearly the fact that we are instances and reflections of the ground of vitality itself” (36). In using red to symbolize this spiritual contamination, Miyazaki follows on the earlier established distinction between the blue of the Sea of Decay and the warm, earthy tones of the Valley, which have marked red as a signifier of humanity, but, as I argue, also of anger and rage. He showcases elements of such spiritual pollution by predominantly adorning his human characters with red jewels, but also by coloring the cloaks of the Tolmekian king's guard and their leader Kurotowa blue on the outside but red on the inside. This red lining only becomes visible when they draw their swords and perpetuate violence, creating a strong association between the color and brutality (00:33:19-00:35:00). In the same scene, Nausicaä, blinded by rage after seeing her father killed, attacks the Tolmekian soldiers, and accidentally stabs Yupa in his arm, after which red blood appears, thereby making her aware of her uncontrollable anger and its dangers to her environment. To explore this psychological poisoning of the natural world by humankind,

Miyazaki also deliberately undermines this initial color opposition, particularly in his depiction of the Ohm population: while the calm Ohms have eyes with a blue hue, their eyes become red when filled with anger; something that only occurs when the Sea of Decay, or they themselves, are disturbed by external factors, such as invasive humans (00:10:42-00:11:12).

The focus on the ignorance of the Tolmekians' human exceptionalist perspective further emphasizes the complexities of these spiritual and physical entanglements. Their attempt at liberating humanity from the toxic forest reflects how unaware they are of its function as nature's device to clean up the physical traces of pollution left in the soil by the previous civilization (00:41:50-00:43:02), or of their dependency on the clean drinking water that the forest filters (01:04:08-01:09:12). Thus, they are unable to see how the Sea of Decay exists simultaneously as a toxic (man-made) danger to humankind as well as the only thing that is now keeping them alive. It is this blindness that continually leads to the enagement of the Ohms and the other insects, resulting in even more destruction. By making these transcorporeal relationships visible through intricate and colorful animation, Miyazaki allows the viewer to observe such otherwise invisible ties as well as the dangers of our incomprehension of them.

Visualizing Human Cruelty and the Good/Evil Binary

Because of this focus on the visual (in combination with narrative) representations of the multilayered transcorporeal entanglements of the human and non-human, the human-exceptionalist emphasis on the goodness of humanity in relation to the immorality of nature comes into question. The foundational human exceptionalist view of nature's destruction and cruelty, exemplified by Lord Yupa's encounter with a deceased family in a village consumed by the Sea of Fire (00:01:10-00:02:00), invites the viewer's sympathy with humankind, which, then, frames their actions in fighting against nature as good, justified and necessary. However, nature's harshness is not the primary focus of

Nausicaä; the film instead explores humanity's capacity for cruelty, both to other humans and the non-human.

This focus is made explicit in how the Valley of the Wind is disturbed by the crashing of a large airship belonging to the Tolmekian empire, which carries the last Great Warrior (00:25:17-00:25:30). As the villagers are respectfully burying the dead of the crash, the Tolmekian army invades the Valley and kills the largely paralyzed, and thus defenseless, King Jihl (00:32:39-00:33:20; 00:36:00-00:38:50); the stark contrast between these two intentions portray the Tolmekians as evil. Nevertheless, the Tolmekians consider their actions necessary for the eradication of the Sea of Decay and, thus, deem themselves justified in using the last Great Warrior (01:02:50-01:03:02). In their attempt at stopping the Sea of Decay, it appears that the Tolmekians, like the Pejitan, are blind to their entanglements with the toxic forest, and misuse the reactionary force of the insect population for their own perpetration of violence, thereby only aiding the spread of the Sea of Decay, consequently wreaking even more havoc.

Nausicaä, on the other hand, is aware of the Sea of Decay's cleansing properties (00:41:50-00:43:02; 01:04:08-01:09:12), and her interactions with natural life and the insects suggest that an alternative way of life, one of respecting nature instead of striving to control it, is also possible. Here, Miyazaki again makes use of the visual opposition of warm and cool colors, specifically the colors red and blue, to symbolize the different *modus operandi* of the human and non-human, but combines them in the character of Nausicaä: most prominently, he visually stresses her different perspective and values through her light blue outfit that sharply contrasts with the warm earthy tones typical of the Valley itself and its inhabitants (00:16:50-00:18:00). In the Sea of Decay, on the other hand, she is almost camouflaged, except for her red hair, which stresses her unmistakable and inherent humanness. Thus, here, Miyazaki contrasts these two colors in Nausicaä to stress her double belonging (00:16:50-00:18:00). This is further foregrounded when she attempts to rescue the baby Ohm from the Pejitan, whose torture led to the enraged Ohm stampede towards the Valley of the Wind. During her rescue attempt, Nausicaä is shot twice, and her red blood is starkly

contrasted with the blue blood of the Ohm. In fact, her light pink dress, given to her during her escape from the Pejitan airship, is dyed blue in the Ohm's blood, leaving all but a little red square on her chest, which emphasizes that, while Nausicaä remains a red-bleeding human, both human and non-human behavioral elements can nevertheless co-exist (01:43:07-01:43:26). The colors blue and red are again contrasted in the film's climactic scene in which Nausicaä and her rescued baby Ohm remain donned in a blue hue, as they stand facing the stampeding mass of enraged Ohms, which are painted red amid the fiery haze caused by the last Great Warrior. In this scene, it becomes evident that the Tolmekian army and the Ohms continue to fuel each other's rage, and the red haze signifies the consequent endless cycle of destruction that is perpetuated by the transcorporeal effects of humanity's actions.

Thus, in his use of color, Miyazaki simultaneously recreates and problematizes the boundaries between the human and non-human, good and evil, without using a single word, thereby allowing for an effective way of reflecting on their entangled relationship and reminding the viewer that such binaries might not be as black and white as they may seem.

Conclusion

By creating visual distinctions and connections between the natural world and the human world, as well as their literal and spiritual 'cross-contamination', Miyazaki shifts the focus from a human exceptionalist perspective towards a philosophy that focuses on harmony between humans and nature, out of an acknowledgement that humanity's actions have a consequence on a much broader, often planet-wide, scale. *Nausicaä*, therefore, can be said to create this awareness of the often unexpected or unintended consequences of human actions, by elucidating their capacity for destruction. Moreover, the film's empathic heroine Nausicaä fights for nature and humanity simultaneously, thus advocating that it is possible to have both the interest of the people and the planet at heart. Thus, especially when academic and literary writing appear insufficient to communicate the pressing realities of

contemporary life in the Anthropocene, Miyazaki's intricate use of color as a non-linguistic narrative tool may prove useful in instilling a sense of transcorporeal consciousness without forcing unambiguous, one-dimensional messages upon the viewer, thereby helping relay complex information to the audience without it being too paralyzing to digest. As this paper's scope is limited, animation's role in creating awareness of the Anthropocene might best be further developed by investigating other films, such as Studio Ghibli's *Laputa Castle in the Sky* (1986), *Spirited Away* or *Princess Mononoke*, or the animated Walt Disney film *Wall-E* (2008), to see what other storytelling media are available when one is lost for words.

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Biography

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