



Ecocritical Themes in Hayao Miyazaki's Anime Films: An Analysis of Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984) and Princess Mononoke (1997)

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Abstract

This dissertation provides a scene-based ecocritical analysis of environmental themes in Hayao Miyazaki's animated features, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Moving beyond traditional descriptive summaries, the study employs a film studies lens to investigate how Miyazaki utilises precise visual strategies, such as colour symbolism, mise-en-scène, and spatial configurations, to dismantle anthropocentric worldviews and construct ecological meaning. By situating the analysis within Japanese religious traditions, the study demonstrates how Miyazaki portrays the natural world as a sentient, agentic force that resists human dominion.

The research fills a significant gap in scholarship by pairing these two films as contrasting temporal imaginaries of environmental crisis: *Princess Mononoke* (1997) depicts the violent, active expansion of industry, while *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) envisions a post-apocalyptic aftermath in which nature initiates its own concealed renewal. This study draws on the theoretical frameworks of Timothy Morton's 'mesh', Greg Garrard's 'other-than-human', and environmental hermeneutics, as well as Layman Tower Sargent's critical dystopias and Donna Haraway and Ana Tsing's collaborative survival in the ruins by staying with the trouble of a damaged world. In doing so, the dissertation argues that Miyazaki presents a relational ontology where humans and nature are fundamentally interdependent. Ultimately, the dissertation concludes that these films, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), serve as powerful tools for environmental advocacy, compelling viewers to reflect on their ecological responsibilities and the potential for a non-hierarchical coexistence in a damaged world.

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1. Introduction

Hayao Miyazaki's films are more thematically significant today than ever, especially in a world facing imminent threats of climate change, environmental collapse and the "overconsumption of limited natural resources" (Dodson 2011, p. 5). Miyazaki's use of film and visual storytelling "shows how the commodity of cinema can be repurposed by the [filmmaker] to communicate an understanding of the problems of our history and our time" (Mumcu and Yilmaz 2018, p. 7). In this way, Miyazaki uses his films to address various environmental issues, such as "ecological responsibility [and environmental] sustainability" (Gossin 2015, p. 209), and portray humanity's complicated, avaricious relationship with the natural world. Through his use of vivid animation and multi-layered storytelling, Hayao Miyazaki's films "offer unique aesthetic perspectives" (209) of the natural world, showcasing it as more than "just a passive backdrop or foreground for human activity" (Mumcu and Yilmaz 2018, p. 3). Rather, Miyazaki portrays the natural world as a "relational, living and endeavouring thing" (3) governed by its own will, which is a character by its own right.

Hayao Miyazaki is known as "a master world builder" (Gossin 2015, p. 209), and "one of the greatest living animators [of our time]" (Napier 2018, p. 01). From the start of his animation and film career in the early 1960s up until today, he has set himself apart from other animators and film directors "with his unique [animation] style, [environmental] values and [recurring] themes of ecology" (Morgan 2015, p. 174). Miyazaki is widely regarded as "Japan's most revered auteur and *anime* giant" (Lenburg 2021, p. 11) and is considered the "standard-bearer and greatest representative of Japanese animation" (Berton 2020, p. 167). He is widely acknowledged as "one of the world's most influential and most respected animators" (Lenburg 2021, p. 11) and is also "a source of inspiration for leading animation studios all over the world, such as the American studio Pixar and the British studio Aardman, among many others" (Greenberg 2018, p. 15). On the other hand, Miyazaki's sui generis filmography has cultivated a global audience, including a wide range of critical scholarship that spans generations and cultures.

Unlike existing scholarship, which often provides broad thematic summaries of Hayao Miyazaki's work, this dissertation offers a sustained, scene-based filmic analysis of *Nausicaä*

of *the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). By focusing on specific cinematic sequences, such as the ‘Decimated Village’ and the ‘Forest Spirit Encounter’, the study investigates how micro-level visual strategies, including aposematic colour symbolism and spatial configurations, function to dismantle anthropocentric worldviews. This methodology demonstrates that Miyazaki’s aesthetic choices are not merely background elements but active tools for constructing a relational ontology that compels the viewer toward ecological stewardship. By examining the aesthetic construction of ecological meaning, the study argues that Miyazaki’s work fosters a relational ontology where humans and nature are fundamentally interdependent.

The pairing of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is strategic, as they represent contrasting temporal imaginaries of environmental crisis. *Princess Mononoke* (1997) depicts an early moment of industrial expansion in which ecological destruction unfolds through the violence of Iron Town. In contrast, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) envisions a post-apocalyptic aftermath in which ecological collapse has already occurred, and the planet is initiating its own processes of ‘concealed renewal’. Together, these films offer a comprehensive look at the progression of the environmental crisis from active destruction to eventual planetary rebirth.

By adopting an ecocritical lens, this study challenges the western view of nature as solely a resource for human exploitation (Mumcu and Yilmaz 2018, p. 1). I argue that by “walling ourselves off from nature” (Plumwood 2005, p. 98), humanity has created a dangerous distance that strips the natural world of its agency. Miyazaki’s films serve as a corrective to this dualism. Through evocative visual storytelling, he replaces this hierarchical order with a relational ontology in which humans and nature are fundamentally interdependent. By forcing his characters to confront and deal with the consequences of their environmental interactions, Miyazaki compels the audience to reflect on their own ecological practices and responsibilities.

As this is a dissertation in English Studies, the two primary texts, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), are analysed using their English-language

translations rather than the original Japanese versions. While this approach may impact the interpretation of certain linguistic and cultural nuances, including environmental concepts, spiritual ecologies, and the verbal expression of human–nature relationships, the visual storytelling remains unchanged in the English-language translation. Both the English adaptation of *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and the Hewitts’ translation of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) are widely praised for achieving a balance between authenticity to the core meaning and themes of each film and providing accessibility to English-speaking audiences. These adaptations have also been noted for preserving essential philosophical concepts and specific socio-cultural elements of the original texts, such as the importance of various *Shinto*-influenced ecological messages. These adaptations effectively convey Miyazaki’s intricate ecological vision, resonating with English-speaking audiences and allowing for meaningful analysis within an English-speaking framework without diminishing the original film’s thematic preoccupations with environmental motifs.

Hayao Miyazaki’s films, particularly *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), which is the subject of this dissertation, are celebrated not only for their beautiful animation and intriguing storylines but also for “themes that focus on ecology and [the] environment” (Morgan, 2015, p. 172). Miyazaki synthesises these themes “through symbolism, images and story” (172), including traditional Japanese history and beliefs. In doing so, Miyazaki “appeals to the spiritual side of his audience by drawing on existing religious themes, like *kami* from *Shinto* religion, giving reverence to nature” (174). This integration of ecological concern with spiritual and cultural symbolism ultimately allows Miyazaki to present environmentalism not merely as a practical issue, but as a deeply moral and philosophical imperative.

Shinto is an ancient and multifaceted Japanese religion which plays a subtle yet significant role in Hayao Miyazaki’s work. Central to *Shinto* is the belief that *kami*, which are divine spirits or deities, inhabit natural spaces and objects. According to Daniel Clarence Holtom’s (1940, p. 394) interpretation of Motoori Norinaga’s *Kojiki-den*, *kami* refers to “such things as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains, and so forth. Anything whatsoever which was outside of the ordinary, which possessed superior power, or which was awe-inspiring”. This concept

highlights how “spiritual powers exist in the natural world” (Morgan, 2015, p. 172) and portrays the environment as a sacred realm, filled with animating energies and secret knowledge that transcend human understanding and control.

It is important to note that while Hayao Miyazaki incorporates *Shinto* imagery into his work, he “separates himself from organised religion in his films” (Morgan, 2015, p. 174). As Anna Blagrove (2015, p. 7) notes, the influence of *Shinto* only serves to deepen the audience’s sense of connection to the natural world as Miyazaki “doesn’t so much advocate *Shinto* [...] but uses the imagery to signify past tradition, ritual and often protection for the characters” without requiring adherence to a specific religious tradition. This means that *Shinto/Shintoism* and *Shinto* imagery are not central themes in Miyazaki’s films and therefore are not the primary objects of analysis in this dissertation. Instead, this dissertation focuses on providing a critical, literary interrogation of Miyazaki’s visual representation and thematisation of environmental themes in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

Hayao Miyazaki’s films fall under the category of *anime*, as they are Japanese animated films. However, he is highly critical of the commercial environment and the quality resulting from film mass production; he “frankly despises the truncated word “*anime*” because to [him] it only symbolises the current desolation of [the animation] industry” (Miyazaki 1966, p. 67). This “current desolation” (67) refers to a combination of creative, commercial, and structural problems that have compromised the integrity and quality of Japanese animation, leading to a diminished and chaotic business. He frequently questions the quantity of output, noting that at one point, in 1982, “forty animation programs [are] broadcast on [television] every week” (178). This raises the question of whether such a measure of entertainment is needed for children, especially given the deterioration of stories. Many anime series do not consider the impact their works may have on younger generations.

These shows often portray “emotions and thoughts that should be moving [but gives] way to showiness, nervousness, and titillation” (67). On the other hand, the depiction of conflicts and wars often devolves into abstract, simplified contests in which “everything becomes just a giant

game” (77), in which children use these anime films as a yardstick on which they base their values. Even so, when *anime* depicts love as “a psychological game, struggling or fighting becomes a killing game, and competitions become money-based games with defined results” (77). Miyazaki further comments that in essence and practicality, the industry has become an “overdose of animation” (44) where “too much quantity changes quality itself,” (168). In essence, Miyazaki views animation not as a simple commercial product, the symbol of which is ‘*anime*’, but as a powerful, collective storytelling tool, ideally dedicated to giving children encouragement and capturing the world with meticulous realism and imagination.

1.1 Hayao Miyazaki: Early Life, Influences and Career

Hayao Miyazaki was “born on January 5, 1941, in the Bunkyo ward of Tokyo with the Second World War as the backdrop” (Berton 2020, p. 10). He “is the second eldest of four sons” (Lenburg 2021, p. 11) and is currently married to Akemi Ota, and they have two sons of their own, Goro and Keisuke Miyazaki. Hayao Miyazaki’s father, Katsuji Miyazaki, “was an aeronautical engineer who managed his uncle’s company [called] Miyazaki Airplane” (Berton 2020, p. 10). The company produced “rudders for the A6M Zero fighter planes of the Japanese Imperial Army, used in World War II” (10). This professional background “nurtured his love for mechanics, cars and aviation” (10). This passion is prevalent across many of his films, such as *Castle in the Sky* (1986), *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004) and *The Wind Rises* (2013), each of which features representations of mechanical technologies, automobiles, aviation, or some combination thereof embodied in a single character. Miyazaki’s mother, Yoshiko Miyazaki, was a “housewife” (Lenburg 2021, p. 11) who, unfortunately, due to “spinal tuberculosis” (Greenberg 2018, p. 15), was “bedridden throughout most of his childhood and adolescence” (Napier 2018, p. 9). Even so, Miyazaki fondly remembers her as a powerful woman, one “with a strong and resolute personality” (Berton 2020, p. 10) and of great intellect. She soon passed away in 1983, followed by Miyazaki’s father in 1993.

Although Hayao Miyazaki grew up during a war-torn Japan, he mentions that he actually “lived fairly comfortably as a child in the war years, [as] the son of a munitions engineer” (Chute 1998, p. 63). However, as he grew up, he began to feel “pangs of guilt” (63) due to his father’s involvement in the military industry and his role in being a supplier of parts to the state’s

warplanes. This guilt influences the majority of his films, as he insists that he does not “want to make films that support killing and being killed” (Miyazaki 2008, p. 507). Instead, he critiques the military and totalitarian regimes in many of his films. At the same time, he also draws the audience’s attention to humanity’s impact on the environment and how humanity’s destructive tendencies, greed, and capitalist consumption have caused havoc and destruction in the natural world. Yet, Miyazaki also mentions that he aims to create works which tell people about the good in the world. He says that “there are things worthy of life” (Miyazaki 1966, p. 267) and that in this life, despite what is going on around us, “[i]t is possible for wonderful encounters to occur and for beautiful things to exist, that it is good to be alive” (267).

Regarding his education, Miyazaki graduated from “Gakushuin University in 1963 with a degree in Political Science and Economics” (Miyazaki 1996, p. 323). During his university days, he was a member of the “Children’s Literature Study Group” (323) as the university did not have any comic book clubs at the time. He then began reading titles like “*The Count of Monte Cristo* (1846), *The Three Musketeers* (1844) [and] *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894)” (Napier 2018, p. 21). These books became the foundational influence upon which the creation of his first feature film, *The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979), was built. Miyazaki’s interest in film and animation began at the early age of seventeen, when he first watched *Hakujaden* (1958), or its English title *Legend of the White Serpent*, which is the “first Japanese feature-length animation film in colour” (Beron 2020, p. 11). This film “changed his life” (Greenberg 2018, p. 15), and his career path in animation was set in motion.

Hayao Miyazaki began his professional career in 1963 when he “joined [the] Tōei Animation Company as an animator” (Miyazaki 1996, p. 453). At first, he had a job “as an in-betweenner on kids shows” (Chute 1998, p. 68), which is an animator who draws filler scenes between big or detailed frames; later, he became a key “writer and animator” (68) within the company. He then contributed to the creation of *Taiyō no Ōji Horusu no Daibōken* (1965), known as *The Adventures of Hols, Prince of the Sun* in English, which is a film that “celebrated ‘unity among people’ [...] and was shaped by the youthful Marxism of Miyazaki and his colleagues” (68). While working at Tōei Animation, Miyazaki “met two men who became his ‘elder brother figures’: the master animator Yasuo Ōtsuka [...] and Isao Takahata” (Napier 2018, p. 34). They became his mentors who, “in many respects” (Greenberg 2018, p. 19), have “shaped his ideal

perception of animation” (19), which led to Miyazaki’s early career of animation to be mostly fixated on “action-oriented adventure films focused on male protagonists” (47). As Miyazaki’s time at Tōei Animation came to an end, he sought to create and to contribute to productions of “a very different nature” (47), such as “slow-paced” (47) films:

If the Tōei period of his career taught Miyazaki about animation that’s always on the move, his subsequent career in animation taught him how to stand still, appreciating the beauty of the scenery. And while this idea sounds opposed to the idea of animation in theory, it also became a staple of his later work, one to which he owes much of his critical acclaim: the ability to draw the audience’s attention to the small, simple details of everyday life and fill them with beauty and magic (Greenberg 2018, p. 47)

This next phase involved “major involvement with *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974), *Anne of Green Gables* (1979) and *3,000 Leagues in Search of Mother*” (1976) (66), films which solely “focused on the daily life of their [mostly female] protagonists” (47). In 1978, Hayao Miyazaki directed the “TV series *Future Boy Conan*” (Miyazaki 1996, p. 453). This series is noteworthy because both it and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) “deal with the ecological implications of human behaviour on the world” (Greenberg 2018, p. 104) and feature a protagonist who “is a ‘civilised’ young person who educates the people surrounding him about how to build a better society” (104). In 1979, Miyazaki went on to direct his first feature film, *The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979). Miyazaki then “co-founded Studio Ghibli in 1985 with Isao Takahata” (Miyazaki 1996, p. 453), while producer Toshio Suzuki also “took an active part in the 1985 creation of Studio Ghibli” (Berton 2020, p. 102). Suzuki is recognised as “one of the few people who can give a direction to Miyazaki’s works” (103) and guide the director in his creative process.

1.2 Thematic Motifs in Studio Ghibli Films

Hayao Miyazaki’s filmography at Studio Ghibli demonstrates a consistent evolution in ecocritical vision, characterised by intersecting thematic and aesthetic clusters rather than a simple chronological progression. A foundational concern across his oeuvre is the impact of human behaviour on the natural world, an interest established in early works like the TV series *Future Boy Conan* (1978) and fully realised in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). In the latter, Miyazaki presents the “Sea of Decay”, which is an ecosystem that, while lethal to humans, acts as a purifying force to absorb toxins from a polluted Earth. This ecosystem, in

turn, depicts nature as an autonomous, self-preserving entity that initiates restoration without human intervention. This theme of an agentic nature reappears in his later work, such as *Ponyo* (2008), where the presence of a sea-princess on land triggers a tsunami, demonstrating nature's power to restore balance, regardless of the human cost.

Miyazaki often utilises the 'growing up' narrative to explore how characters navigate their relationship with the other-than-human world, most notably in the unofficial trilogy comprising *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), and *Spirited Away* (2001). In these films, protagonists move beyond childhood insecurity by forming courageous, non-hierarchical connections with forest spirits or supernatural realms. These narratives foster a relational ontology, challenging the dualistic western view of nature as a mere resource and instead presenting it as a sentient character. Parallel to this, reflecting his own "pangs of guilt" (Chute 1998, p. 63) regarding his family's involvement in the military industry, Miyazaki's films frequently critique the marriage of technological ingenuity and industrial violence. *Porco Rosso* (1992) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) move into more adult moral universes, addressing the complexities of war and the corruption inherent in industrialised societies. This critique culminates in works such as *The Wind Rises* (2013), which serves as a dark vision of how human aspirations for engineering perfection can be co-opted as tools of death used during the war.

The two films selected for this dissertation, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), represent the apex of these thematic concerns. While earlier films like *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) or *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) are often described as "gentle to nature" (Miyazaki 2008, p. 27), *Princess Mononoke* (1997) marks a significant break away from this gentleness and is instead a film which portrays a more brutal, realistic depiction of civilizational expansionism and environmental retaliation. By pairing the depiction of the active industrial destruction in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) with the post-apocalyptic vision of concealed renewal in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the progression of environmental crisis from its violent onset to its eventual planetary aftermath. This strategic pairing allows for a scene-based investigation into

how Miyazaki utilises filmic strategies to dismantle anthropocentric worldviews across different temporal imaginaries of ecological collapse.

1.3 Research Objectives

The research objectives of this dissertation are to explore how Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) portray environmental concerns and humanity's relationship with the natural world through an ecocritical lens, with a particular focus on their visual storytelling composition and narrative form. I analyse the 'Decimated Village' sequence in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) to demonstrate how Miyazaki utilizes aposematic colour symbolism and mise-en-scène to construct a vision of ecological destruction and nature's agentic power. I argue that the 'Underground Garden' scene represents a critical dystopia where Nausicaä's scientific inquiry reflects Donna Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble," revealing nature not as a resource but as an autonomous, self-healing agent. I explore the subterranean 'New World' in relation to the "re-worlding of the Anthropocene," investigating how filmic strategies, such as low-angle shots of colossal trees and a monochromatic blue palette, signify planetary renewal independent of human intervention. I analyse the 'Boar god's Demon Curse' in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) to show how the fusion of human technology and organic flesh visually manifests Timothy Morton's concept of the mesh of life and the blurring of boundaries in multispecies entanglement. I argue that Ashitaka's encounter with the *Shishigami* and the *Kodama* establishes a relational ontology, positioning him as a liminal mediator who bridges the gap between anthropocentric worldviews and the sacred other-than-human world. I explore the pairing of these two primary texts as contrasting temporal imaginaries, with *Princess Mononoke* (1997) representing active industrial destruction and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), depicting post-apocalyptic renewal, to investigate the potential for ecological stewardship and coexistence

1.4 Cinematic Context: Film Studies and Anime

This dissertation employs a film studies lens, utilising a literary analysis of the two selected *anime* films directed by Hayao Miyazaki. The two films analysed are *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). This dissertation examines environmental

themes, including ecological hope and imperilled environments, in each of the respective films. It examines how Hayao Miyazaki's use of narrative structure, visual aesthetics, character interaction, dialogue, and symbolic motifs portray and construct ecological meaning and environmental messages within his films. This study approaches Miyazaki's films as cinematic texts, which means I employ film studies as a tool to examine ecocritical themes in Miyazaki's films and how the meaning of environmental motifs is created in his works.

Film studies is a discipline which explores how meaning is created in film. Certain film scholars argue that cinema is ideally suited to confront the "problems of reality" (Sikov 2020, p. 6), more specifically, the reality of the natural world. In this context, film becomes a means of addressing and dealing with environmental sustainability, the human-nature relationship and ecological collapse, "by making an initial assumption [of the ecological problem] and proceeding logically from it" (6). Here, the initial "assumption is that all representations have meaning" (6). This premise implies that every cinematic element, such as moving images, sound and narrative, carries intrinsic significance. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), these representative elements converge to convey environmental themes and underscore the stakes of ecological crisis. This convergence is particularly evident in anime, where visual and narrative elements are often uniquely integrated.

Anime "refers to Japanese animated film and television [series or cartoons]" (Condry, 2013, p. 1), and Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) are prime examples of *anime* films. However, Susan Napier (2005, p. 6) argues that "to define *anime* simply as "Japanese cartoons" gives no sense of the depth and variety that make up the medium". *Anime* has an "enormous breadth of subject material" (8) from animated versions "of children's classics such as *Heidi [Girl of the Alps* (1974)] to romantic comedies such as *No Need for Tenchi* [(1992)]" (6) and everything else in between. Therefore, it is reductive to define *anime* as a singular genre or place it in a single 'labelled box', as its foundations lie not only in global cinema and twentieth-century photography but also in a wide range of traditional Japanese artforms. These include longstanding cultural practices such as "Kabuki [also known as dramatized Japanese theatre] and the woodblock print" (3), both of

which have significantly shaped the visual language, thematic depth, and stylistic conventions that continue to influence *anime* today. As such, *anime* has a particular visual aesthetic “in which distinctive visual [artistic] elements combine with an array of generic, thematic, and philosophical structures to produce a unique aesthetic world” (10).

Anime films, more specifically *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), are, in more ways than one, “uncompromising [as their] complex story lines challenge the viewer” (Napier 2005, p. 9), especially the viewer who is used to the predictability of mainstream Hollywood animation. It therefore breaches the gap of what non-Japanese “audiences are accustomed to seeing in live-action films” (6). With various ways to describe and understand *anime*, simply put, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is defined as Ian Condry (2013, p. 6) defines it, as a form of “contemporary media in its interconnected webs of commercial and cultural activities that reach across industries and national boundaries. While this dissertation by no means claims to provide an exhaustive analysis of the *anime* genre, it recognises the necessity of outlining some key artistic and aesthetic elements of *anime* cinema in order to understand Hayao Miyazaki’s portrayal of ecocritical themes in the selected films.

However, Miyazaki holds a very personal definition of animation, often preferring the terms ‘cartoon movies’, ‘cartoon films’ or animation over the niche and popular *anime* name. The master animator and director expresses complex, detailed, and often critical views on the nature of animation, the state of the Japanese industry, and his personal philosophy on creating ‘cartoon movies’ throughout his career. In an interview with *Gekkan Ehon Bessatsu: Animēshon* (1979), Miyazaki explains that, to him, animation is “whatever I want to create” (Miyazaki 1996, p. 14). He views it as a medium capable of “building a truly unique imaginary world” (14) while incorporating the “characters [he] like[s] and then creating a complete [animated film] using them” (14). In the process, Miyazaki is able to create, according to him, an animated film which distinguishes itself from Japanese comic books, “children’s literature, or even live action films” (14). He is adamant that all his works must reach an audience, mainly children, as he firmly believes that animation should be for a younger audience but include key life concepts and confront their realities, leaving a positive mark on them that they can carry

into their adult life. Although the majority of his films often tackle harsh topics, such as the devastation of war and its aftermath, his films always contain a thread of optimism. In doing so, “he hopes of making films that give children encouragement” (44) that, despite what goes on in the film, and thereby an extension of life, there is always something to look forward to, and a way to move forward.

1.5 Research Methodology

As this dissertation’s research methodology employs a film lens, it places an emphasis on close reading and an in-depth literary analysis of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) as cinematic texts. In general, close reading involves “the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to a deeper understanding of its meanings which takes into account context, both historical and textual” (Brummett, 2019, p. 30). In relation to this dissertation, close reading is extended to the viewing of the selected films. This involves multiple viewings of each film, in-depth analysis of critical sequences, visual motifs and dialogue exchanges which embody Miyazaki’s elegiac (yet urgent) ecocritical depiction of the fraught and occasionally conciliatory relationship between humanity and the non-human world.

Literary analysis is an important part of how literature and, by extension, film is interpreted and therefore understood. Catherine Belsey (2013, p. 160) defines literary analysis as a “research method involv[ing] a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help”. With the interpretation up to the viewer’s subjective response and interpretation, Belsey (2013, p. 164) notes that one must “always read the sources and consider the analogues”. The reader, researcher, and, in this case, viewer of the film, must not take what other critics and scholars say and report at face value. Instead, the viewer must remain inquisitive, analytical, and construct their own meaning of the text. Catherine Belsey’s (2013) work is instrumental in shaping my own ideas regarding the selected films and how I integrate them, threading the ecocritical theoretical framework through the textual analysis. In my close reading of Miyazaki’s work, I utilise a specific set of interpretive questions established by Catherine Belsey to ensure a rigorous encounter with the text itself:

What [are the films] about? What kinds of prior knowledge might illuminate it? What difference does it make if we locate the work textually and historically? What position, or range of positions, does the text offer its reader? How can we best let *the text itself* set the agenda for research that will generate insights? And finally, how far, as a result of all this labour, can we expect to arrive at a definitive interpretation?

Using these questions as a guide suggests that Hayao Miyazaki's films are open to diverse interpretations which are marked by dense thematic complexity and subtextual nuance. This allows viewers to engage with them from many perspectives. Regarding this dissertation, these films are viewed as ecological warnings, cautionary tales and ecological fables. Miyazaki wields his filmic craft as a decidedly sharp tool, slicing through preconceptions of the natural world while calling the viewer to environmental action.

This study employs visual analysis as an interpretive tool for understanding how Hayao Miyazaki constructs ecocritical meaning in his animated films. As Cindy Toh (2021, p.141) observes, Hayao Miyazaki uses "animation as a medium to explore real-world issues in pleasurable and playful ways", drawing on his "incredible ability to create imaginary worlds" (Bartolomei, Ippolito and Mezzino 2023, p. 2). In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), these imaginary spaces are not arbitrary but are meticulously crafted to reflect ecological tensions and the relational dynamics between humans and nature.

Visual analysis enables a close examination of filmic elements, including *mise-en-scène*, shot composition, colour symbolism, and spatial arrangement. Ed Sikov (2020) defines *mise-en-scène* as "the expressive totality of what you see in a single film image," comprising "settings, props, lighting, costumes, makeup," and the "camera's actions and angles" (6). In animation, this expressive control is heightened as every minute detail in animated cinema is constructed frame by frame in a "process that simulates movement by filming a series of individual drawings, objects or computer images" (Sikov 2020, p. 215). Hayao Miyazaki's meticulous attention to environmental detail is evident in the "landscapes he creates," where animation "conveys the essence and atmosphere of the depicted places" (Bartolomei, Ippolito and Mezzino 2023, p. 5).

Colour symbolism communicates “meanings at several levels such as physical, psychological, and aesthetic” (Samanta and Tripathi 2024, p. 154). For example, in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), Hayao Miyazaki often contrasts warm, golden hues with darker, bluer tones to mark specific instances of environmental threat or ecological harmony. He also uses colour to depict the characters’ understanding of the imagined world and their distinctive, richly imagined inner lives, emotional states and attitude towards the environments they inhabit. Miyazaki’s use of camera movement and spatial composition underlines this ecocritical cinematic aesthetic, with shots designed not only to guide the viewer’s attention but also to evoke emotional and ethical reflection.

As mentioned above, a critical aspect of Miyazaki’s cinematic vocabulary is the spatial tension between foreground and background, with human and non-human figures often dwarfed by vast woodland canopies or imposing industrial machinery. An excellent example of this compositional strategy is evident in *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The characters of Ashitaka and San are repeatedly framed as minuscule figures beneath the towering Forest Spirit or when they are engulfed by the ancient, dense forests. Human beings are diminished, almost Lilliputian figures in these haunting compositions, visually emphasising nature’s scale and agency. Similarly, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) showcases sweeping aerial shots which position Nausicaä as a tiny presence within the immense Toxic Jungle or beneath the colossal *Ohmu*, emphasising the overwhelming force and autonomy of the natural world. This compositional strategy underlines the stark imbalance between nature and technology. However, technology is the biggest expression of human endeavour and attempts to ‘harness’ the earth’s latent power and natural resources. Yet, in the selected films, it reinforces the central concerns with industrialisation, ecological restoration, and environmental sustainability.

Through this lens, Hayao Miyazaki’s animation encourages ecological discourse, prompting viewers to reflect on their own relationship with the natural world. As Heise (2014, p. 303) notes, animation can function as an “aesthetic genre that engages with the reification of nature and its possible alternatives in modern society”. Miyazaki’s work embodies this function, utilising visual and narrative strategies to challenge anthropocentrism and reimagine a more relational and interconnected world. This section provided an overview of the research

methodology and how the films, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), are to be analysed by their respective scenes. This next segment discusses film terms and techniques.

1.6 Film Terms and Techniques

This dissertation mentions various film techniques and terms used in the two selected films. This section outlines the critical film terms and techniques employed throughout this dissertation, establishing an analytical vocabulary drawn directly from film scholarship. These terms span the core elements of film form, including *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, sound, and narrative structure. The discussion below outlines the key concepts drawn primarily from Ed Sikov's *Film Studies: An Introduction* (2020).

The central organising principle for analysing the visual elements within a frame is called *mise-en-scène*. This is a French theatre term which translates literally to “that which has been put into the scene or put onstage” (Sikov 2020, p. 5), and “describes the primary feature of cinematic representation” (5). In film studies, *mise-en-scène* is understood as “the expressive totality of what you see in a single film image” (5) encompassing “all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed” (5). Amy Villarejo (2022, p. 43) notes that the formal analysis of film traditionally divides the components of *mise-en-scène* into five core categories. This includes the actions and mannerisms of the performers in the frame, as well as the “setting, lighting, costume [and] make-up”. It also incorporates the camera's relationship to the subject, specifically including cinematography and the camera's angles and actions.

Cinematography itself is defined simply as “photography for motion pictures” (Sikov 2020, p. 6), while simultaneously combining “all the strictly photographic elements that produce the images we see projected on the screen” (38). Within the filmed image, the composition refers to the “precise arrangements of objects and characters within the frame” (19). Composition is typically considered as “the relationship of lines, volumes, masses, and shapes at a single instant in a representation” (35). When discussing the aesthetic choices in a film, one often

comes across a scene or the entirety of a film that comprises a single colour or different shades of a single colour. This is called monochromatic colouring.

An excellent example of this is found in *The Matrix* (1999), directed by the Wachowski siblings, Lana and Lily Wachowski. They employ varying shades of green to portray a simulated world in which the characters find themselves trapped, using it as a contrast to the real world outside that simulated world. While films like *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982, dir. Godfrey Reggio) use varying shades of blue and grey to contrast human-dominated spaces versus those of natural ones, *Silent Running* (1972, dir. Douglas Trumbull), and *WALL-E* (2008, dir. Andrew Stanton) use varying shades of green and brown to portray environmental degradation, ecological fragility and the overconsumption of natural resources.

The fundamental building block of motion pictures is the shot, which is defined as “an uninterrupted run of the camera, or an uninterrupted image on film” (Sikov 2020, p. 224). In film, there are various types of specific shots which provide different meanings and emotions regarding the subject or objects in frame. These shots consist of the close-up, which usually focuses on a person’s face and “isolates an object in the image, making it appear relatively large” (10). Conversely, the medium shot is taken from the waist up at a medium distance from the subject, while a master shot is “taken from a long distance that includes as much of the set or location as possible, as well as all the characters in the scene” (16). A two-shot is a specific type of framing that is generally used to capture the conversation happening between two characters on screen.

An eye-level shot positions the camera at the same level as the character’s eyes, giving the illusion that the character is looking directly at the audience. A low-angle shot films the subject from below, and a high-angle shot films the subject from above. This technique “may suggest a certain superiority over a character” (Sikov 2020, p. 13) or be used “to subtly criticise the subject by making [them] seem slightly diminished” (14). The use of high-angle shots is most notably seen in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) when Nausicaä flies over the spreading fungal forest, which minimises human presence as she is infinitesimal in comparison to the *Fukai*. While in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), the Nightwalker towers over the gigantic

trees and mountains in the Ancient Forest. Here, this shot showcases how the environment emphasises the immensity of the glowing forest spirit and its presence within the natural world. Mobile framing techniques shift the spectator's position within the shot. This means that the camera is moving in some way to achieve a desired result. A pan or panning shot occurs when the camera remains stationary but "pivots on its axis from side to side" (Sikov 2020, p. 25), while a tilt or a vertical pan means the camera is still but "tilts up and down" (25). A tracking shot involves the camera moving "parallel to the ground [...] physically through [the] space" (26) and follows the subject or object on screen. The illusion of motion can also be affected by lens choice, such as a wide-angle lens, which "[has] great depth of field" (227). The depth of field means "that objects near the camera, midway, and far from the camera are all in sharp focus" (51). Editing is the process of linking one shot to the next through the use of transitions. In film, one of the easiest transitions to use and identify is the 'cut'. This transition appears to involve two film strips being "literally cut with a blade and taped to the second shot" (217). Other transitions often used between scenes or sequences include the fade-in, which involves the image gradually appearing, and the fade-out, where the image steadily disappears.

The soundtrack of a film always includes three main categories: dialogue, music, and sound effects. The dialogue refers to all spoken words, "including conversations, monologues [...] and] voice-over narration" (Sikov 2020, p. 78). Voice-overs occur when "a character seemingly speaks directly to the audience without appearing onscreen" (81). Sound elements are categorised based on their relationship to the film's story world, or diegesis. Diegetic sound refers to sounds "sourced in the world of the film's story" (218). This means that if the characters in the film can hear the sound, it is diegetic. On the other hand, Nondiegetic Sound consists of sounds "that are not sourced in the world of the film's story" (222), such as the film's Music score. Ambient sound consists of "the background noises of the scene's environment" (79), which are usually diegetic.

In terms of narrative, it is crucial to differentiate between the story and the plot. The story consists of "all the events of the narrative as they occur in chronological order from beginning to end, including not only those that we see and hear, but those we infer" (Sikov 2020, p. 90, 91), whereas the plot refers to "the ordering and structuring of narrative events as they are

presented in the film” (91). These events are arranged into formal units, such as scenes, defined by a “unity of time, space, and action” (94). Finally, underlying all filmic choices is ‘ideology’, which refers to “a system [or systems] of beliefs that shape our understanding of and relationship to the world around us, often without our being aware of the power and influence [of those beliefs]” (170). Hayao Miyazaki’s ideology fundamentally challenges anthropocentric worldviews. Therefore, he creates films which portray “a world in which nature is not yet dominated by humanity and exists as a powerful force in itself” (Napier 2001, p. 153).

This section detailed filmic terms and techniques used in regard to the creation and analysis of film, which this dissertation employs. This next segment is divided into two distinct yet interconnected sections. The first part outlines the primary theoretical framework for the study, it presents an overview of the key concepts and perspectives of studying nature and the environment in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The second part presents a literature review detailing ecocritics and scholarly works which prove vital for the analysis of the selected films in this dissertation.

1.7 Theoretical Framework

1.7.1 Ecocriticism

Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) defines ecocriticism as the “study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis” (430). However, Simon Estok (2005) argues that ecocriticism is more than “the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analysing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents, literary or other, that contribute to material practices in material worlds” (110). These concepts are valuable for understanding how Miyazaki’s films depict the consequences of human actions on nature and provoke viewers to reflect on the importance of ecological stewardship. Ecological stewardship is defined as the responsible use and protection of the natural

environment through conservation and sustainable practices, rooted in a recognition of the intrinsic value of the other-than-human world. In Miyazaki's films, stewardship is presented not as human management of nature, but as a commitment to witnessing and protecting autonomous natural processes, such as Nausicaä's refusal to destroy the Toxic Jungle in favour of understanding its purifying purpose.

Ecocritical theory, which is predominantly rooted in western perspectives, has significantly influenced critical discourse on the dynamic relationship between literature and the environment. Buell (1995) has pointed out this bias and emphasised the necessity of broadening ecocritical research to include a more diverse range of cultural perspectives. Similarly, Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, in "Beyond Nature Writing" (2001), have underscored the limitations of this western-centric approach, advocating for a more inclusive ecocritical worldview that incorporates various cultural viewpoints to address this imbalance. According to Habeeb and Habeeb (2012), the inclusion of ecocritical discourse in animated film aims to reveal the intimate connection between humans and the environment. An ecocritical perspective, on the other hand, highlights how artistic representations of nature can shape and be shaped by our interactions with it. In essence, ecocritical perspectives are more agential, perhaps, or potentially transformative in their focus on this mutually constitutive, evolving relationship and how this balance can be changed or affected through art. This concept is evident in Hayao Miyazaki's films, where the enchanted forests play a central role in the narrative by being depicted "as alive and animated, confronting and co-existing with human characters" (Toh, 2021, p. 141).

Ecocriticism serves as a useful lens for analysing how Miyazaki's films express environmental concerns and negotiate the relationship between humans and the natural world. In adopting this perspective, the dissertation situates *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) within a dialogue with western ecocritical thought, while simultaneously emphasising that their ecological imaginaries are shaped by specifically Japanese cultural and philosophical frameworks. Hence, the aim is to bridge the gap between ideas of environmental portrayal in cinematic media, such as those of animation, which can reach and impact a global contemporary audience. This dissertation examines how these elements are integrated into the

film's narrative to convey environmental motifs and messages that resonate with current concerns about the impact of industrialisation on nature. This research also examines how these techniques offer a culturally grounded alternative to western models of environmental representation and the separation of the human-nature relationship.

Beyond management, this dissertation argues that ecological stewardship is enacted through pacifism. In Miyazaki's films, pacifism is framed here as a kind of resistance against the violence of industrialisation. In Miyazaki's narratives, pacifism is not a passive stance but a proactive commitment to breaking the cycles of environmental and human violence. It functions as a form of multispecies justice that allows the environment the time and space necessary to undergo its own restorative processes without further human interference.

1.7.2 Environmental Hermeneutics

This study also employs an environmental hermeneutics approach, focusing on close reading, visual interpretation, and literary analysis of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Environmental hermeneutics "is the extension of principles of interpretation to environments of any kind" (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen and Utsler 2014, p 3). Environmental hermeneutics builds on this approach by interpreting what is seen in the film and how space, agency, and moral significance are constructed through the environment. Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (2014, p. 3) argue that environmental hermeneutics involves "the interpretation of actual encounters of or within environments [...] meant to deepen our understanding of places with which we have direct interaction" (3). These scholars offer a foundational definition for this interpretive approach, emphasising its philosophical depth:

[Environmental] Hermeneutics is commonly defined as the reflection on the "art and science of interpretation," not simply of written texts, but as a form of thinking itself. Most broadly, the question of interpretation is not merely asking about a technique for discerning a single meaning or finding one interpretation that is the right one (2).

In this sense, Hayao Miyazaki's films provide a rich site for environmental hermeneutic inquiry. The viewer is drawn into landscapes where "animals, plants, and even features of the landscape [are] set in motion and endowed with agency" (Toh 2021, p. 140). This "dynamic

representation of the landscape” (Bartolomei, Ippolito and Mezzino 2023, p. 3) not only animates the natural world but also invites the audience to interpret it as a living, responsive presence. In doing so, the resulting “sense of realism and vitality” (3) encourages ethical reflection, prompting viewers to reconsider their relationship with nature and to engage in the very interpretive processes that environmental hermeneutics describes.

1.7.3 The Anthropocene: Origins and Scholarly Debates

While this dissertation examines environmental destruction, it specifically situates these crises within the era of the Anthropocene. First popularised by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the term denotes a new geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant influence on the Earth’s climate and ecosystems. Crutzen and Stoermer proposed the 18th century as a starting date, coinciding with James Watt’s invention of the steam engine, though other scholars point to the “Great Acceleration” of 1950 as the true onset. Despite its widespread adoption, the Anthropocene remains a contested concept within the environmental humanities.

Scholars like Donna Haraway (2016) critique the term for being too human-centric and argue that the focus on “Anthropos” (Man) reinforces the very exceptionalism that caused the crisis. The crisis that Donna Haraway refers to is a multifaceted global emergency characterised by the systematic destruction of the conditions required for life to continue on Earth. She argues that the term “Anthropocene” is too human-centric because it reinforces human exceptionalism, which is the belief that humans are separate from and superior to the natural world, which is the very mindset that drove the planet into this disastrous state. Donna Haraway (2016) instead proposes “staying with the trouble” (1), emphasising multispecies justice and a shift toward relational ethics. Similarly, Anna Tsing (2015) investigates the possibility of “life in capitalist ruins” (1), arguing that we must look for eruptions of unexpected liveliness and collaborative survival within blasted landscapes. This study engages these debates by analysing how Miyazaki’s films move beyond viewing nature as a passive resource, instead portraying it as a sentient force capable of resisting human dominion. While contemporary eco-film scholarship often focuses on the “Anthropocentric”, this dissertation prioritises Miyazaki’s relational ontology, which seeks to dismantle human-nature hierarchies entirely.

1.7.4 Critical Dystopias and Collaborative Survival in the Ruins

While the Anthropocene is frequently narrated through a lens of ‘totalising despair’, this dissertation employs a trio of theoretical frameworks to identify what Lyman Tower Sargent (2022) describes as glimmers of hope within Miyazaki’s landscapes of destruction. By synthesising the work of Sargent (2022) Anna Tsing (2015) and Donna Haraway (2016) the analysis moves beyond a descriptive account of ecological collapse toward a rigorous study of multispecies resilience.

Lyman Tower Sargent (2022) distinguishes the critical dystopia from traditional dystopian narratives by its refusal to accept an inevitably bleak end. As Michael S. Cummings argues, while a standard dystopia may offer a warning of a worse future, Layman’s description of an “imperfect, critical utopia—whether as dystopian warning or eutopian inspiration—is the only one we can trust” (quoted in Sargent, 2024, p. ii) because it encourages us to “envision and struggle for betterment” (ii). This genre functions as a form of “social dreaming” (7) that retains the possibility of transformation even amidst environmental collapse. By applying Sargent’s lens, this study argues that the decimated landscapes in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) are not mere sites of mourning but are transformative spaces where new ecological orders are established.

The possibility of such transformation is further articulated through Anna Tsing’s investigation into “life in capitalist ruins.” Tsing (2015) rejects the “modern human conceit” (19) that nature is merely a passive backdrop for human progress, arguing instead that “neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival” (19). Tsing’s framework allows for an analysis of the Toxic Jungle not as a site of pollution, but as what she terms “third nature” (viii), that which “manages to live despite capitalism” (viii). This study utilises Tsing’s concept of “unintentional design” (152) to decode how “shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans” (20) actively re-order the world in the wake of industrial failure.

Finally, to bridge the gap between acknowledging destruction and enacting renewal, this dissertation adopts Donna Haraway’s ethic of “staying with the trouble.” Haraway (2016)

defines this as a commitment to “multispecies storytelling” focused on “partial recuperation and getting on together” (Haraway 2016, p. 10). To stay with the trouble is to eschew “self-indulgent myths of apocalypse” (10) in favour of “multispecies players... attuned to still possible finite flourishing” (10). By integrating Haraway’s framework, the analysis shifts from seeking a ‘cure’ for the environmental crisis to investigating how Miyazaki’s protagonists ‘become-with’ their other-than-human relatives in a shared struggle for ongoingness. Together, these three concepts provide the necessary analytical vocabulary to examine Miyazaki’s concealed renewal. They transform the analytical focus from a descriptive account of ecological collapse to a study of humanity’s relationship with the natural world, all the while co-existing on a damaged planet.

1.7.5 The “Mesh” of life and the “Other-than-human”

A vital analytical lens for this dissertation is Timothy Morton’s (2012) concept of the mesh, which describes the interconnectedness of all life-forms. Morton (2012, p. 22) argues that the boundaries between life-forms are never “rigid and thin” but are instead “wide and permeable”, creating a state of ecological entanglement where no being is truly separate from its environment. By introducing this concept in the framing of the study, the dissertation prepares the reader for the scene-based analysis in Chapter Two, where the mesh is used to decode the blurring of animate and inanimate boundaries.

The mesh is particularly useful for understanding the character of Nago in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), whose corrupted body becomes a literal fusion of organic flesh and a human-made iron musket ball. By adopting Timothy Morton’s lens, the study argues that violence directed toward nature is never external as it inevitably circulates through the mesh to infect human life, as seen in the brands of corruption that infect Ashitaka’s arm. Integrating the mesh into the initial theoretical framework ensures that the subsequent analysis of multispecies entanglement is viewed as a core pillar of the project rather than a belated afterthought.

This dissertation also adopts Greg Garrard’s (2023) portmanteau adjective other-than-human to describe the sentient beings, deities, and natural forces depicted in Hayao Miyazaki’s

cinema. Greg Garrard (2023, p. xii) argues that the term “nonhuman” is inherently problematic because it “implies lack or failure,” effectively establishing humanity as the central barometer for value and reinforcing a hierarchical worldview where everything else is defined by what it is not. Similarly, while the term “more-than-human” is frequently used in environmental humanities, this study prioritises Garrard’s phrasing to emphasise relational difference without hierarchy.

By utilising this term, the dissertation aligns itself with the work of ecofeminist Val Plumwood, whose concept of the “Earth Other” Garrard uses to recognise both difference and our shared connection to the Earth. This framework is vital for analysing Miyazaki’s work because it rejects the western thought that views nature solely as a resource for human consumption. Instead, it allows for a relational ontology in which humanity and the other-than-human are viewed as “provisional fictions that are thoroughly interwoven” (Garrard 2023, p. 17) rather than distinct, hierarchically ordered domains. Integrating this term into the initial theoretical framing ensures that when the other-than-human is discussed in relation to the *Ohmu* in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) or the Forest Spirit in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), it is understood not as a secondary category of life, but as an active, agentic force capable of resisting human dominion.

1.7.6 Models of Autonomous Nature: Silence, Symbiosis, and Concealed Renewal

To move beyond an Anthropocentric view of the environment, this study identifies three specific models of nature’s agency: silent nature, symbiosis, and concealed renewal. The significance of silent nature lies in Miyazaki’s portrayal of a natural world where ‘nature acts silently’, rejecting the need for human dialogue or management. This silence is a rejection of anthropocentric control, signifying that the most vital restorative processes on Earth occur independently of human language or intervention. Closely linked to this is the concept of symbiosis, which this study adopts as an alternative to parasitism. While industrial human activity is often depicted as parasitic, such as extracting resources and leaving behind “capitalist ruins” (Tsing 2015, p. 1), Miyazaki offers a symbiotic alternative through characters who seek to become-with their environment. This transition from a parasitic to a symbiotic relationship is the core of the ecological arc in both films.

Finally, these processes culminate in what this study terms concealed renewal. This refers to the autonomous, subterranean biological processes that purify the planet independently of human intervention. It is concealed because it occurs out of human sight and often beneath the blasted landscapes of industrial failure. By defining these models, the dissertation provides a framework to decode how Miyazaki constructs a coherent ecological arc, shifting from environmental catastrophe to silent, concealed renewal. This next section provides the literature review for this dissertation, containing scholarly sources from ecocritics to film scholars, all of which are critical to the overall analysis of the two selected Hayao Miyazaki films, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

1.8 Literature Review

Throughout the years, a wealth of research has been conducted on Hayao Miyazaki's films, representing a diverse range of critical perspectives. While existing scholarship has established the importance of environmental motifs in his work, this dissertation positions itself within several key scholarly conversations while identifying a specific research gap regarding the scene-based filmic analysis of ecological meaning. Feminist analyses by Karissa Sabine (2017) and Jolie Finley (2023) have explored how Miyazaki creates protagonists who are uniquely feminist, highlighting characters like Nausicaä, from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and San, from *Princess Mononoke* (1997), as strong leaders who challenge traditional gender roles. This dissertation extends this research by examining how these female protagonists act as liminal figures or mediators between the human and other-than-human worlds, particularly in moments of high-stakes ecological conflict.

A significant body of work also focuses on Miyazaki's engagement with Japanese cultural heritage and spirituality. Shoko Yoneyama (2021, p. 251) characterises his philosophy as "critical animism," while James W. Boyd and Tetsuya Nishimura (2004, p. 3) argue that Miyazaki draws on *Shinto* traditions to perceive all life as pervaded by a "generative, immanent force". Although scholars like Miyaji Naokazu (1966) and Helen Hardacre (2017) explore the historical tenets of *Shinto*, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts to investigate how Miyazaki utilises visual symbols, such as golden light and the Forest Spirit's appearance, to translate these spiritual concepts into a cinematic experience. Building on the work of Susan

Napier (2005, 2018), Raya Denison (2015), and Dani Cavallaro (2006), who approach Miyazaki through the lens of visual language and cultural symbolism, this study provides a sustained, scene-based investigation into how specific filmic elements, such as colour symbolism and spatial configuration function to dismantle anthropocentric worldviews.

Within the past two decades, Gwendolyn Morgan (2015), Pamela Gossin (2015), Cindy Toh (2021), and Sema Mumcu and Serap Yilmaz (2018) have increasingly analysed the ecological precarity and moral ambiguity in Miyazaki's films. Gossin (2015, p. 216) argues that Miyazaki's perspective verges on an "unabashedly anti-anthropocentric attitude", while Toh emphasises his rejection of dualistic thinking that separates nature from culture. Below is an in-depth review of key scholarly sources in the field of ecocriticism and film media, especially regarding Hayao Miyazaki's oeuvre.

Cindy Toh's "The Aesthetics and Ethics of Hayao Miyazaki's Enchanted Forests" (2021) highlights how *Princess Mononoke* (1997) serves as a "forceful warning against humanity's retreat from its naturalised [...] origins" (145). Toh contends that Miyazaki challenges "human-centric ethics" (141) by situating his narratives in "an imagined past imbued with fantastical elements" (141). Central to these narratives are environmental themes inextricably rooted in Japanese animism, which is "the belief that all creatures, objects, and even places can be ascribed a 'life force'" (144). This is exemplified in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) through the presence of the Forest Spirit, who embodies the life and death cycles of the forest. Moro, the wolf god, explains this to Ashitaka, "the Forest Spirit gives life and takes life away. Life and death are his alone" (Miyazaki, 1997).

Miyaji Naokazu's "What is *Shinto*?" (1966) and Helen Hardacre's "*Shinto*: A History" (2017) explore the origins and fundamental spiritual tenets of *Shinto* religion, demarcating its etymology, defining characteristics and the impact of various mythologies and dogmatic influences on Japanese society, art and media. Hardacre (2017) examines *Shinto* religion, its significance in Japanese history and how *Shinto* informs various aspects of Japanese culture, including its depiction in *anime* films and media. Naokazu (1966) examines the various forms

of *Shinto* influenced by other religious traditions, providing insight into the synthesis of spirituality, cultural practices, and mythology in *Shinto* belief and practice. Naokazu also emphasises that the development of the *Shinto* religion did not come about in “isolation” but “originated and developed as a phenomenon in such a wide religious circle” (41). He highlights how *Shinto* belief should be viewed within a broader religious context that includes neighbouring regions such as “Korea, the [Ryukyu Islands], and even the continental countries, or rather all East Asia” (41). Naokazu also notes that although contact with foreign cultures was not always frequent, it was nevertheless continuous, resulting in “more or less foreign influence in the field of ideas as well” (41). These observations stand in contrast to monotheistic practices and discourses within the Judeo-Christian tradition, which have frequently been interpreted as reinforcing anthropocentric understandings of the world through the notion of human ‘dominion’ over nature. By comparison, *Shinto* appears as a markedly fluid and syncretic tradition, continually shaped by intercultural encounters rather than being fixed as a singular, stable system of belief.

Ian Condry’s *The Soul of Anime* (2013, p. 2) discusses *anime* as an enterprise of “collaborative creativity”, noting how *anime* has “collective social energy” with a “sustainable form of creative expression” (2) that includes contributions from writers, animators, and fans to create a vibrant and evolving medium. The stylistic characteristics of *anime* include unique character designs, expressive features, and multilayered visual composition. While the depth, detail and space between the foreground and background and the sharp contrasts of colour and setting are essential components of its aesthetic, allowing for intricate world-building, symbolic imagery, and emotionally nuanced storytelling that both celebrates and critiques contemporary life. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), Hayao Miyazaki employs this visual juxtaposition to convey moral ambivalence and emotional depth without resorting to explicit, laborious exposition. For example, the peaceful image of the character Ashitaka from *Princess Mononoke* (1997), riding a red-elk through the lush green forest contrasts sharply with the menacing, interspersed shots of Iron Town’s smokestacks polluting the air. These compositional shifts visually convey the film’s core tension between environmental harmony and industrial progress, as Miyazaki invites viewers to read meaning in mood, colour, and atmosphere rather than dialogue alone.

Susan Napier's "Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art" (2018) investigates various Hayao Miyazaki films and their themes of nature, mythology, and the balance between industrialisation and the environment. Her work also explores Miyazaki's use of visual storytelling techniques to portray these themes, particularly in *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Napier (2018, p. 185) provides a compelling summary of Miyazaki's ability to construct complex, interwoven worlds that transcend traditional binaries:

[b]y using the magic of animation, Miyazaki creates a vividly realised world in which a wide range of human and nonhuman characters cross conventional boundary lines of physicality, gender, species, and the natural and supernatural. Ultimately [his films offer] a vision of life as a densely interwoven design, rather than a simple allegory of dichotomised opposites.

In this passage, she foregrounds Hayao Miyazaki's nuanced depiction of the relationship between humanity and nature, interpreting the film as an "elegy for a lost Japan" (2005, p. 176) that harkens back to a time before modernity and industrial society disrupted the natural order. These observations demonstrate Miyazaki's unique, ecocritical artistic project and how he employs rich narratives and visual storytelling to illustrate the conflict between human progress and the natural world.

Similarly, Eric Reinders' "The Moral Narratives of Hayao Miyazaki" (2016) explores *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) through an ecocritical lens that highlights themes of ecological restoration and harmony with nature. In this essay, Reinders examines Miyazaki's haunting portrayal of a post-apocalyptic environment so dire that humanity is on the brink of extinction. His discussion places emphasis on the choices humans must make regarding their relationship with nature, which is a seemingly paradoxical force that is both sustaining and existentially threatening. Through this paradoxical tension, the film can be viewed as a moral fable or cautionary tale, as it requires humanity to decide whether they will learn to coexist with nature or continue down a destructive path. Reinders reads the film as a hopeful narrative despite its dystopian themes, suggesting that the film is ultimately "about persisting despite hopelessness [...] about living without any good reason to hope" (30). This viewpoint emphasises the resilience required to face an uncertain future amid ongoing environmental disasters.

Furthermore, Hayao Miyazaki's works deliberately avoid simplistic narrative conventions typically associated with animated films. His films do not adopt an ironic, deconstructionist, hyperactive, and frenetic pace or visual language often seen in children's cinema, much like many animated films. Instead, Miyazaki's films venture into complex moral territory exhibiting "their transparency, unadorned by postmodern syntax" (Osmond, 2008, p. 23) by This narrative clarity is not a simplification but a refusal of rigid moral binaries. For Reinders, Miyazaki's films eschew self-awareness, irony and other features commonly evident in mainstream animated fare. While *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) both complicate the hero's arc. An example of this departure from the hero's quest narrative is even more apparent in *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), which eschews conflict altogether. The film's gentle, episodic structure and absence of a traditional antagonist challenge the conventions of traditional animated narratives and audience expectations of dramatic tension and resolution, instead offering a quiet meditation on childhood, place, and the sacredness of the everyday. *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) is not one of the primary objects of this dissertation, but it serves as an example from Miyazaki's oeuvre that demonstrates the range of tones and approaches to these concepts and characterisation in his work.

Sema Mumcu and Serap Yilmaz's "*Anime Landscapes as a Tool for Analysing the Human-Environment Relationship: Hayao Miyazaki Films*" (2018) analyses Miyazaki's cinematic representation of landscapes and the natural environment, with an emphasis on the relationship between humans and the natural world. In their discussion of Miyazaki's work, they note how "through the human relationship with their surroundings, animated landscapes can be used for questioning the dualistic western worldview and creating ecological awareness" (p.03). They highlight how Miyazaki's films teach lessons of "environmental conflicts, courtesy towards nature and each other" (4), which "provide a mechanism for provoking and contributing to debates concerning environmentalism and offer audiences a way to find meaning about human life [and the environment ...] through an animated landscape" (4). Through this thought-provoking catalyst, Sema Mumcu and Serap Yilmaz (2018) illuminate the ways in which Miyazaki's films showcase the need for humans and the environment to ultimately depend on each other and should ideally coexist peacefully. This is evident in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), where Nausicaä's underground garden demonstrates the restorative potential of nature once it is freed from human contamination. The space is not only symbolically sacred

but also visually distinct, with an array of lush and glowing plants growing in a serene setting. This scene strongly suggests that a balanced ecosystem is both necessary and achievable for environmental restoration.

Gwendolyn Morgan's "Creatures in Crisis" (2015) discusses the environmental crises represented in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Morgan explores how these stories reveal the intricate and precarious relationship between humans and nature. She highlights the tension between our idealised perceptions of the environment and the harsher ecological realities we face. Lady Eboshi, a character in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), exemplifies this paradox within the narrative. She is depicted as a dynamic leader driven by a genuine desire to uplift her people; she shows compassion and kindness by providing sanctuary for the marginalised. However, these laudable aspects of Lady Eboshi's character are sharply juxtaposed with her role as an agent of environmental destruction. Through her character, "Miyazaki, therefore, offers nuance and complexity by avoiding a simplified narrative of 'good versus evil'" (Toh, 2021, p. 145). Lady Eboshi's reckless pursuit of industrial expansion threatens the delicate ecological balance of the ancient forest. This is further exemplified by "the film's battle between San and the forest gods and [Lady] Eboshi and the ironworkers, [which] effectively parallels the contemporary environmental conflicts between nature and industry" (Thevenin, 2013, p. 160).

Morgan's (2015) analysis of *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) also highlights the films' evolving portrayal of environmental issues over time. For example, the past is depicted as a culmination of two viewpoints in *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The first viewpoint embodies a vision of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, represented by Ashitaka and the ancient forest spirits. The other reflects the early stages of human-driven environmental exploitation, portrayed through Lady Eboshi and the ironworks. However, these viewpoints may also "problematise the past and, implicitly, the attitudes toward it" (Napier, 2001, p. 181). By presenting the past as a contested space between ecological balance and industrial ambition, rather than merely as a simple ideal or a clear decline, Miyazaki challenges nostalgic or one-sided views of history. In doing so, he prompts the

audience to reconsider modern attitudes toward progress, nature, and the inevitability of environmental degradation.

As this section has discussed the literature review, this next segment outlines the films by providing a synopsis of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), setting the stage for the analytical discussion in Chapters One and Two. Morgan highlights the significance of apocalyptic themes, noting that the societies in Miyazaki's films are rarely presented in simple 'good versus evil' terms. This dissertation builds on these perspectives by offering a micro-level filmic analysis of specific scenes to show how cinematic techniques, such as Timothy Morton's mesh and the re-worlding of the Anthropocene, are visually articulated on screen. Ultimately, this study fills a significant research gap by pairing *Nausicaä* and *Princess Mononoke* as contrasting temporal imaginaries of crisis, demonstrating that Miyazaki's aesthetic choices do not merely support the plot but actively construct a relational ontology that compels the viewer toward ecological stewardship.

1.9 Synopsis of the selected films

The two selected films "reflect simultaneously our history and our future with their environmental issues and themes." (Morgan, 2015, p. 172). Therefore, in these films, Hayao Miyazaki "creates a space where the complexity of relationships between humans, spirits and nature can be explored." (172). Here, Miyazaki portrays how the "actions of the characters in the films are symbolic of humanity's poor choices over approaches to solving environmental problems" (176).

1.9.1 Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984)

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984) is set in a distant future where humanity teeters on the brink of extinction after a cataclysmic event destroyed the Earth and almost all its inhabitants. Anja Gauger, Mai Pouye Rabatel-Fernel, Louise Kulbicki, Damien Short and Polly Higgins (2013, p. 4) note that this level of destruction inflicted on the planet is classified as an "ecocide". This is an event which, caused by the direct actions of humanity, produces the

“extensive destruction of ecosystems” (4) while “the direct physical destruction of [the environment ...] can in some instances lead to the death of humans and other beings” (6). In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), during the Ceramic Wars, humanity creates living bioweapons known as the God Warriors. These weapons laid waste to the entire planet, the destruction akin to that of multiple nuclear fallout, which left the world burning for seven days (See Figures 1 and 2).

A thousand years after the apocalyptic ‘Seven Days of Fire’, the Earth is overrun by the *Fukai*, a ‘Toxic Jungle’ also known as the ‘Sea of Decay’ (See Figures 3 and 4), which has evolved to withstand the pollution and waste left after the War. Its reach spreads across the land, “consisting of thick forests of plants and fungi giving off poisonous gases [...] and [is] inhabited by [various] giant mutant insects, [the largest of them called the *Ohmu*]” (Hairston 2010, p. 175). This film thematises the catastrophic consequences of ecological instability and humanity’s struggle to coexist with nature after this apocalyptic event.

The *Ohmu* are described as “bulky and menacing [insects]” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 56) and are shaped like “whale-sized pillbug-like creatures” (Hairston 2010, p. 175) who are extremely “refined organisms endowed with intelligence, sensitivity and [a] purpose” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 56) to protect the Sea of Decay (See Figures 5 and 6). At the edge of the Toxic Jungle lies a bucolic kingdom known as the Valley of the Wind, which is also bordered by an ocean called “Acid Lake” (Miyazaki, 1984). The breeze from the ocean benefits the Valley by keeping the *Fukai*’s spores at bay and the Valley free from contamination, while also driving their windmills, creating power for the Valley inhabitants. Nausicaä is the princess of this kingdom and is renowned for her compassion, as well as her special connection to nature. While most of the human characters in the film see the *Fukai* as a threat, Nausicaä seeks to understand its purpose rather than destroy it. In doing so, she makes a discovery in her underground garden that the Toxic Jungle is purifying the Earth, neutralising the miasma. It is an ironic dilemma. The very thing that appears to threaten the remnants of humanity is, in fact, a natural corrective course. Here, Nausicaä’s discovery situates the Sea of Decay as nature being a self-healing and regenerative, powerful force, which is restoring the Earth from the catastrophic environmental damage humans themselves caused.

Miyazaki further complicates the narrative when Nausicaä's peaceful valley is drawn into a violent war between the militaristic kingdoms of Pejite and Torumekia. The Torumekian Empire unearths a dormant God warrior beneath the capital of Pejite and launches an attack on the Pejites, who oppose the revival of the bioweapon. The very name 'God Warrior' suggests a deification of war and annihilation, a figure of divine violence that stands in unadulterated divergence from the animist reverence for life on display elsewhere in the film. The Torumekians seize the God Warrior and take the Pejite Princess Lastell as a hostage. They make their way over to their allies, the people of the Valley of the Wind, in hopes of obtaining support and military help to awaken the bioweapon and use it to burn away the Sea of Decay. However, their airship crashes into the Valley, killing Princess Lastell while bringing a rain of contamination and spores (See Figures 7 and 8) from the Toxic Jungle into the Valley.

Kushana, the leader of the Torumekian military, initiates a hostile takeover of the Valley of the Wind, killing King Jihl, Nausicaä's sick father. In a rage, Nausicaä retaliates, killing the armoured soldiers. Lord Yupa, trusted advisor to the king, steps in and calms her down. She then makes her way beneath the castle to her underground garden (See Figures 9 and 10). A site of knowledge where she discovers the healing nature of the *Fukai*. Nausicaä's underground garden represents a powerful microcosm of the healing process the planet must go through in order to 'purify' itself and counter the contaminating influence of human exploitation. This, in turn, shows the viewer nature's resilience and subtextually offers a hopeful vision of harmony between humans and the environment. Her underground garden also highlights the contrast between conventional, anthropocentric worldviews and an ecocritical understanding of the Toxic Jungle. When Kushana lays down an ultimatum, The Valley is tasked with helping to revive the God Warrior and assisting her army in destroying the Sea of Decay or risk the destruction of their home and the loss of their lives.

In the garden, and throughout much of the film, Hayao Miyazaki decentres the human point of view by positioning Nausicaä as a visual disunity in terms of her size compared to the plants she cultivates from samples from the Toxic Jungle. She grows them by using purified water and uncontaminated soil "drawn from deep underground, the castle's windmill" (Miyazaki, 1984). Nausicaä discovers that the plants she has grown are not inherently poisonous. She

comes to the realisation that the plants' toxicity, and in turn the Toxic Jungle, only arises from the polluted environment in which they typically grow. Nausicaä's discovery proves that the imminent danger truly lies in the contaminated earth, a direct consequence of humanity's past environmental destruction, rather than in the plants themselves. Nausicaä reveals this information to Lord Yupa with a sombre, anxious expression, as though the knowledge itself is a heavy burden to bear. The soft glow of the purified plants that surround her is a sharp contrast with the emotional gravity of her realisation, reinforcing both the scale of the past ecological damage and the moral urgency of her insight. However, this revelation challenges the other characters' deeply entrenched prejudices about the Toxic Jungle as a malevolent, 'othered' space, an existential threat that must be annihilated. Here, Miyazaki highlights a deep-rooted unwillingness to cooperate with or coexist in harmony with the natural world.

As a military ally of Torumekia, Nausicaä agrees to Kushana's deal and is taken hostage by Kushana to return to Torumekia. Along the way, the airship is gunned down by Asbel, the Prince of Pejite, in revenge for kidnapping and killing the Princess Lastell. Asbel is shot out of the sky, and Nausicaä saves him using her glider she brought with her on the Torumekian airship. Soon, they are under attack from other Torumekians who try to shoot them out of the sky. Asbel and Nausicaä are hit, and they crash into the Sea of Decay. They sink through the forest floor and land in a crystal-like world, clean and pure from poison and pollution above. Here, Asbel and Nausicaä discover the truth about the *Fukai* and how this underground world is the key to healing the planet, though it may take centuries more to restore the earth to what it once was before the Ceramic Wars.

The duo makes their way back to the surface, only to come to find that the kingdom of Pejite has set a trap in the Valley of the Wind. The Pejites obtain a baby *Ohmu*, injuring it in hopes of attracting an angry swarm of stampeding adult *Ohmu* into the valley, causing devastation in their wake, as their intention is to kill the God Warrior and destroy the Torumekian army. Nausicaä witnesses the cruelty of such an act and assumes the responsibility of returning the baby insect to the Sea of Decay and saving her Valley. In doing so, she sacrifices herself to calm the stampeding *Ohmu*'s wrath. However, she is then brought back to life by the *Ohmu*, fulfilling an ancient prophecy of a warrior clad in blue who will bring peace to their lands.

Having discussed the plot of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), this next section provides a synopsis of *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

1.9.2 Princess Mononoke (1997)

Princess Mononoke (1997) is a unique piece of speculative cinema that challenges the boundaries between myth and modernity. The film showcases breathtaking animation, conveying important environmental messages that reflect ancient *Shinto* belief systems within the broad plot schema of a heroic quest narrative. Set in a world on the brink of environmental collapse, *Princess Mononoke* (1997) explores the tension between industrial progress and the natural world. As human expansion consumes the ancient forests, the balance between civilisation and nature shatters, leading to a violent struggle between the forces of industrialisation and the gods of the ancient forest.

Ashitaka, the last prince of the *Emishi* people, is cursed (See Figure 11) by the dying boar god, Nago, who is “sent into a maddened state by an iron musket ball that had lodged in his body” (Napier, 2018, p. 181). Here, the boar god is portrayed as a version of nature that has become perverted, obscene and grotesque (See Figure 12) as it has been infected by human greed, selfishness and rampant capitalist aggression. Seeking a cure to the curse, he is tasked by the wise old woman of his village to leave the village, find the source of the iron musket ball and ultimately find a cure to his curse. She instructs him to go about his journey and to “see with eyes unclouded” (Miyazaki, 1997), as the curse upon him will manifest as rage and hatred, just as it did in the case of the boar god Nago and turn Ashitaka into something he is not.

Ashitaka journeys westward and encounters a diverse assortment of characters. He helps two injured men after they were in a battle with the gods of the Ancient Forest, a sacred place known as the realm of the non-human, a place occupied by gods and demons. Ashitaka soon enters the Ancient Forest and encounters the elusive and sacred *Shishigami* (See Figure 13). This deity is known as the Forest Spirit and endows the environment with life and agency. As he continues, he comes across Iron Town, the place where the two injured men are from, and

he discovers is the source of the iron musket ball lodged in Nago's side. This town is a mechanised settlement led by the ambitious and morally ambiguous Lady Eboshi, whose ironworks encroach upon the Ancient Forest and its *kami* inhabitants. Among the forest dwellers resisting Iron Town's attritions is San, a fierce warrior raised by wolf gods, also known as Princess Mononoke.

During Ashitaka's stay at Iron Town, he comes to find that the town is mining for iron ore deep beneath the mountains. However, to get to iron in these mountains, the iron workers need to cut down the trees. This act of deforestation is what angers Nago. His fury untamed, he charges at Lady Eboshi and her soldiers and prompts her to fire her rifle, shooting him down with an iron musket ball, which lodges itself in his ribs and turns him into the demon which attacked Ashitaka and his Village. Ashitaka meets with Lady Eboshi in a secluded area of the town that belongs to her, a private garden (See Figure 14) to which no one else has access. Like Nausicaä, Lady Eboshi utilises her garden as a place of discovery where she tests new ideas for the Town and its people. However, she is not alone in this place; various men and women, who are sufferers of leprosy, are bandaged up from head to toe, occupy this space as well. They are hard at work creating wooden rifles for Lady Eboshi (See Figures 15 and 16).

This technology is advanced compared to Ashitaka's bow and arrow or that of the *samurai* warriors' *katana* or Japanese long sword of the time period. For context, a samurai is a "member of the Japanese warrior caste. The term *samurai* was originally used to denote the aristocratic warriors (*bushi*), but it came to apply to all the members of the warrior class that rose to power in the 12th century and dominated the Japanese government until the Meiji Restoration in 1868" (Britannica, Online). Lady Eboshi goes on to tell Ashitaka that she is developing even more deadlier weapons that enable her to "kill any forest monster" (Miyazaki 1997), she may encounter. Ashitaka is angered by this news, asking Lady Eboshi how she could think of inflicting more pain on the forest creature. Ashitaka's rage manifests in his cursed arm, which in turn amplifies his negative emotions. As if with a mind of its own, Ashitaka's right arm reaches for his sword, ready to kill Lady Eboshi. However, his self-control rises to the surface, and he manages to dampen down his anger and, in turn, the curse.

Meanwhile, San, Princess Mononoke of the Ancient Forest, makes her way to Iron Town with the intention of killing Lady Eboshi and putting an end to the destruction she is inflicting on the environment. During the confrontation, Ashitaka pleads with San to leave and go back to the forest, as she is walking into a trap. San ignores Ashitaka's warning and ends up unconscious when a rifle is shot at her, shattering her mask. Ashitaka is caught in the crossfire, a bullet shooting straight through his chest. Yet, he still stands and walks over to San as the people of Iron Town aim to kill her. Ashitaka intervenes and protects her, demanding that they both be allowed to leave Iron Town (See Figures 17 and 18). The pair leave, Ashitaka forcing his way through the town's gates. On the other side, Yakul, Ashitaka's red-elk, awaits to transport them wherever need be. Yakul is a domesticated red elk who, like Ashitaka, is the last of his kind and is a "descendant of a species headed for extinction" (Miyazaki 2016, p. 14). As the trio journeys along, Ashitaka loses a significant amount of blood and eventually falls off Yakul and onto the ground. San, who has awoken, takes charge and leads Yakul, along with a cataleptic Ashitaka, to the Ancient Forest. Here, the trio await the presence of the Forest Spirit, who, according to San's wolf goddess mother, gives and takes away life. Ashitaka's bullet wound is healed in the presence of the *Shishigami*, yet the curse branded on his arm still spreads to the rest of his body.

Soon, the other animal gods and forest creatures go to war against Lady Eboshi and her Ironworkers. This then results in Lady Eboshi beheading the god of the ancient forest and, in turn, destroying all life on the planet. As the headless *Shishigami* rages across the earth in search of its head, a black substance oozes from its body (See Figure 19), killing everything it touches. Ashitaka and Princess Mononoke retrieve the head and offer it to the Forest Spirit, who reattaches it and promptly collapses to the ground, disintegrating in a wave of light as black ooze dissipates and lush greenery takes its place. The planet is saved from disaster.

Princess Mononoke (1997) is a great example of the western-centric 'hero's quest'. Although the selected films are structured in a manner that is aligned with certain features of the traditional quest narrative, they also diverge from the archetypal western models. As outlined in Joseph Campbell's "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" (1949, p.14), the hero's journey typically involves a chosen protagonist that comes "from the world of common day [who takes on a task which leads them] into a region of supernatural wonder", undergoing trials, receiving

supernatural aid, and transforming over the course of their journey. Although Ashitaka's journey echoes this structure, Miyazaki destabilises it through morally ambiguous characterisation, the absence of a clear antagonist, and the influence of animist cosmology over individual heroism. Miyazaki's portrayal of *kami* within the ancient forest positions the film as animistic.

This animism also reshapes the traditional hero's quest of seeking domination or conquest and gaining mastery over some external enemy or force. An example of this is when Ashitaka becomes entangled in the conflict and tries to bridge the gap between humans and nature, seeking harmony in a world consumed by greed, destruction, and vengeance. Here, Miyazaki subverts conventional expectations of heroism and resolution by presenting Ashitaka's quest as a pursuit of coexistence and understanding with the natural environment, rather than a conquest between the ambiguous 'good' and 'evil' sides of the war. This segment provided a plot overview of the film *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The following sections provide detailed information about the characters from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), who are analysed and discussed in Chapters One and Two.

1.10 Characters in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997)

1.10.1 Characters in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984)

In an interview with *Animage Comics* (1982), Hayao Miyazaki reveals that the character of Nausicaä was born from a combination of Bernard Evslin's Nausicaä in *The Adventures of Ulysses* (1969), and a Japanese folk tale about a woman who loved insects and believed things should be looked at with "care and an impartial eye" (Berton 2020, p. 74)). In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), Nausicaä (voiced by Alison Lohman) is the "eponymous princess" (24) who, alongside her ill Father, King Jihl, leads the peaceful Valley of the Wind. She is "renowned for her pacifism and strong belief that humankind can co-exist with the [Toxic Jungle and its insect inhabitants]" (Greenberg 2018, p. 99). King Jihl's illness prompts Nausicaä to seek a cure; however, in the process, her curiosity and determination lead her to

investigate the Sea of Decay. In her lab, “where she manages to grow non-polluted flora” (116), she samples from the Toxic Jungle, she discovers that the *Fukai* is purifying the earth. This knowledge positions Nausicaä as an “agent of renewal and redemption” (Napier 2018, p. 75) in her strife-torn world as she is the “only person who seeks to understand the nature of the *Fukai*” (Berton 2020, p. 74).

Asbel (voiced by Shia LaBeouf) is a prince who comes from the “industrial city of Pejite” (Greenberg 2018, p. 99) and is the brother of Princess Lastelle. Initially, Asbel is “determine[ed] to avenge his unfortunate sister” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 57) who died in the airship which crashed into the Valley of the Wind by attacking the planes carrying Kushana and the hostages. Nausicaä then rescues him after his fighter plane is shot down and nearly crashes into the Toxic Jungle. However, they do not emerge from the *Fukai* and end up sinking through the forest floor, entering a “crystalline world of peace and purity” (Napier 2018, p. 166). His interaction and conversation with Nausicaä calm his thoughts, and his initial “death-dealing [mania]” (Reinders 2016, p. 36) simmers down.

Lord Yupa (voiced by Patrick Stewart) is Nausicaä’s mentor, a “master swordsman” (Berton 2020, p. 65) and a trusted friend to King Jihl. He is “devoted to the exploration of the planet’s secrets” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 51) and often goes on solo trips, exploring the post-apocalyptic landscapes as he measures the *Fukai*’s progress in consuming the planet. Alongside Nausicaä, he also searches for answers about the *Fukai*. Despite his wisdom and expertise, he has a limited understanding of the Toxic Jungle and its long-term benefits to humanity. However, he remains open to Nausicaä’s theories and ideas about the environment, acknowledging that her research is beneficial to humanity’s survival.

Although the character Kushana (voiced by Uma Thurman) is not discussed in depth, understanding who she is as a character provides context for the rest of the analysis regarding her personality and significance in the narrative. Kushana is the military antagonist of the film, leading the powerful Torumekian empire. She is a “skilled warrior and natural leader” (Greenberg 2018, p. 110) who is cutthroat and merciless. She has a narrow perception of the *Fukai*, having lost her arm to one of the giant insects of the Toxic Jungle. Like many of the

other characters in the film, she views the *Fukai* as a site of hostility and death. Kushana is often viewed as a “dark mirror for Nausicaä” (110) as she “leads [with] ruthlessness and fear” (110), in contrast to Nausicaä’s compassion. Kushana arrives at the Valley of the Wind “to hunt down the remaining survivors from Pejite” (99) after the Tolmekian airship, carrying Pejite hostages and the giant God Warrior, crashes into the Valley of Wind. However, during her time there, Kushana takes control of the Valley, her soldiers assassinate King Jihl, and she revives the monstrous bioweapon that once destroyed the planet.

Pejite and Torumekia are two empires which serve as the prime human antagonists in the film’s narrative. They represent two distinct aspects of humanity’s self-destructive post-apocalyptic struggles. The Pejites are based on Hayao Miyazaki’s earlier manga, *Sabaku no Tami* (1969), where the people of the fictional capital of Pejite “struggle to free [themselves from the] oppressive Kittarl [clan]” (Greenberg 2018, p. 100). In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), the Pejites are one of the “last human communities bordering the *Fukai*” (Napier 2018, p. 76), where the ancient weapon of the giant God Warrior is discovered. As a result, the city “is invaded and destroyed by Kushana” (Greenberg 2018, p. 99), who is a “princess and ruthless leader of the Torumekian army” (99). After the attack, “refugees from Pejite attempt to make their way to another peaceful kingdom, the Valley of the Wind” (99).

The people of Pejite harbour resentment toward the Torumekians because Kushana stole the “extant demon” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 36) and kidnapped their young Princess Lastell, who ultimately ends up dead. They seek revenge by using a wounded baby *Ohmu* as bait to lure an army of angry, stampeding *Ohmu* toward the Valley of the Wind. This is a method the Pejites used on their own city when Torumekia attacked and kidnapped their princess and stole the God Warrior. In doing so, they hope to achieve the death of the God Warrior and the downfall of the Torumekian army. However, the people of the Valley are casualties in such an act of destruction.

The Torumekias or Tolmekians are a dominant and aggressive military force noted for their “use of mechanised vehicles [and weapons]” (Greenberg 2018, p. 110). Their leader, Kushana,

initiates the attack on Pejite, and in doing so “largely [wipes] the community out in an assault whose aftermath is chillingly reminiscent of the effects of a bombing raid” (Napier 2018, p. 76). Obtaining the God Warrior and on the hunt for remaining Pejites, the Torumekians invade the Valley of the Wind with the aim to “obtain the support of Nausicaä’s subjects in their mission to destroy the [Toxic Jungle]” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 49). Their goal is to “obliterate the Sea of Decay” (Reinders 2016, p. 239) using the God Warrior and seize control of the rest of the uncontaminated land of the planet.

The kingdom of the Valley of the Wind is known as a diplomatic kingdom, “set at the edge of the Sea of Decay” (Greenberg 2018, p. 99) and is characterised by its “pastoral utopia of windmills and lush farmland” (Napier 2018, p. 76). The Valley is for the time being “immune to the rampant contamination of the Earth’s natural resources” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 48) thanks to a “beneficial breeze blowing from the sea” (49). The Valley’s clean environment is maintained through technology that works harmoniously with nature, such as “the windmill [which] functions as the technological underpinning” (Napier 2018, p. 174) of their society (See Figure 20). The people of the Valley are also described as “military [allies] of Torumekia” (Greenberg 2018, p. 99).

However, despite being a peaceful nation with no involvement in the conflict between Pejite and Torumekia, they still find themselves caught in the crossfire. Their homeland is destroyed as the Torumekian army forcefully overtakes their land. The citizens of the Valley are compelled to cooperate with the Torumekians and assist in their attempt to destroy the Sea of Decay when Kushana takes Princess Nausicaä hostage. Soon after, the people of the Valley bravely decide to retaliate against their more powerful allies once they hear that their princess might be dead after Kushana captured her on the Torumekian airship. Coming together, they take up weapons, such as their farming and carpentry tools, to defend their land and seek justice. However, at the same time, a greater threat looms over both nations. The Pejites have betrayed the Valley, despite offering asylum to its surviving victims fleeing Kushana, as they have set a trap to kill the God Warrior and the Torumekian army. This section provided an overview of the characters in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). Therefore, the following segments present an overview of the characters in *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

1.10.2 Characters in *Princess Mononoke* (1997)

San, also known as Princess Mononoke (voiced by Claire Danes), is abandoned at birth by her human parents and raised by the wolf goddess Moro, becoming a sibling to Moro's two wolf cubs. San grows up to be a "ferocious warrior princess" (Chute 1998, p. 62) of the Ancient Forest, while harbouring a growing resentment for humankind. Her hate stems from humanity's rampant annihilation of her forest home and the death they bring to the forest inhabitants. In the film, she is the female protagonist who represents the aggressive defence of the natural environment and embodies the ecocritical term of 'wild nature'. This means that Hayao Miyazaki portrays San, and by extension the environment, as an untamed and complex reality in which he does not "whittle away those [extreme] aspects [of nature's viciousness and ruthlessness] and trivialise the wild by making the wild merely sweet, brave, and pure" (Miyazaki 2008, p. 64). He achieves this through the audience's introduction to San, which is jarring as she is seen with a "bloodstained face" (Cavallaro 2006, p. 11) as she "attempt[s] to suck a bullet out of the [w]olf God's body" (11). Miyazaki positions San as a strong leader and a "protector of nature in the mould of Nausicaä herself" (Greenberg 2018, p. 164), but her struggle "is far more militant and violent in its own right, compared with Nausicaä's pacifism" (164).

Ashitaka (voiced by Billy Crudup) is described as a young "elk-riding prince from an isolated region" (Greenberg 2018, p. 163) and is part of a lost tribe called the *Emishi*. At the beginning of the film, Ashitaka kills the boar god Nago, who has been shot with an iron bullet made by humans. This curses him into a maddened state where he becomes a vile and rancorous monster. However, Ashitaka makes contact with the infected boar god, and "falls under the same curse that drove the boar mad—a curse that makes him almost invincible in battle, but also slowly fills him with hate and rage that will eventually bring his demise" (159). The curse manifests itself as a "tattoo-like mark covering his right arm" (Napier 2018, p. 182) (See Figure 21), branding him as an outcast among his own people as he embarks on a journey in search of a cure. During his travels, he eventually reaches the Ancient Forest, known as "the land of gods and demons" (Miyazaki, 1997). Here, he encounters Princess Mononoke, Moro, and other forest dwellers, including the Forest Spirit. Ashitaka soon travels to Iron Town, where he meets its leader, Lady Eboshi. He later discovers that the bullet which killed Nago was forged in the

same place, and Lady Eboshi is partly responsible for his curse but entirely accountable for what happened to the boar god.

As with Kushana, Lady Eboshi (voiced by Minnie Driver) is not discussed at length within the dissertation; rather, her character design and how she contributes to the destruction of the environment in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) are essential in understanding who she is in the narrative. Lady Eboshi is a morally complex character who serves as the leader of Iron Town. Although she is a “ruthless military leader” (Greenberg 2018, p. 164), she is still “admired by her people” (164) and is viewed as a woman of integrity who has compassion for the marginalised society. Lady Eboshi regularly “employs former prostitutes and other social outcasts in the service of her advanced firearms-manufacturing plant” (Greenberg 2018, p. 159). She does this by buying “women who were destined for a life of prostitution, free[ing] them, giv[ing] them work and assert[ing] herself with moral authority over men” (Berton 2020, p. 118). In doing so, she gives these workers a “means to support themselves and purpose to their lives” (Greenberg 2018, p. 164).

Lady Eboshi also offers employment and care to individuals suffering from Hansen’s disease, which is also known as leprosy. These lepers are “generally shunned by greater society” (Berton 2020, p. 118) and, due to the disease, were forced to keep separate from other people, often living in isolation. However, they are the only people to whom Lady Eboshi gives special care. Although she is at odds with the natural environment, “her struggle against the gods of the forest is nothing but a territorial dispute” (Greenberg 2018, p. 164) as she aims to turn a profit for herself and those under her care. She shows no satisfaction in cutting down the trees or blasting the mountains to dust; to her, it is just a means to an end and something in the way of her getting what she wants.

Iron Town is a “fortified city built and led by the ambitious Lady Eboshi” (Greenberg 2018, p. 159), providing its workers with an unusual degree of dignity and protection. Despite the violent nature of their work, of creating firearms and mining for iron ore, Iron Town “is not portrayed as a place of oppression or slavery; on the contrary, it is a place where social outcasts find honest work and make an honest living” (162). The Iron Town workers are a community

of people composed of marginalised individuals during the traditional Muromachi period. The workers, hired by Lady Eboshi, consist of people “who do not fit into the social order” (Miyazaki 2008, p. 72). This labour force also includes various “engineers, labourers, blacksmiths, iron sand gatherers, and charcoal makers” (Miyazaki 2008, p. 14) and transporters, such as “packhorse and ox drivers” (14). Together, these workforces are known as the “*Tatara* clan of iron workers” (Miyazaki 1996, p. 266).

The prosperity of the ironworkers is directly dependent on the destruction of the natural world, since their economic success relies on exploiting natural resources, which means they are responsible for polluting the farmland and for felling the forest’s trees in order to obtain fuel for the huge bellows that keep the fire alive in their foundries” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 122) which is part of their process in refining the mined iron ore. This, in turn, leads to irreversible ecological damage, where the central thematic conflict in the film is the tension between industrial progress and environmental preservation, where advancements in human society come at the expense of nature’s well-being. At the same time, the expansion of Iron Town and the exploitation of the Ancient Forest have led to “violent conflict with its animals and their mythical gods” (Greenberg 2018, p. 160) and Princess Mononoke. Having established the characters in each of the selected films and discussing their role in the films environmental narrative, this next section outlines how the dissertation is organised.

1.11 Dissertation Structure

This dissertation comprises an introduction, two chapters and a conclusion. The introductory chapter has laid the groundwork for the dissertation by presenting the essential components for examining ecocritical themes in Hayao Miyazaki’s *anime* films. Chapter One examines *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), which is a foundational text in the development of Miyazaki’s ecocritical cinematic vision. This chapter investigates how the film decentralises humanity within the narrative in a subtly ecocritical manner, by portraying the character Nausicaä as a mediator between human and non-human entities. In this film, Miyazaki foregrounds the need to generate meaningful discourse and conversation about urgent environmental crises while simultaneously acknowledging the potentially catastrophic consequences of anthropocentric ecological devastation tied rapacious environmental

consumption. Therefore, this chapter examines the film's portrayal of a post-apocalyptic world where ecological restoration and the balance between humanity and nature are the central themes.

Chapter Two shifts focus to *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and how this ambitious film portrays the seemingly intractable conflict between industrialisation and the natural world. This chapter examines how Miyazaki portrays human-nature relationships in ways that defy simplistic moral judgment, particularly the ideological divide between Lady Eboshi's industrial ambitions for Iron Town and the forest guardians led by San. As Cindy Toh (2021) notes, Miyazaki "never advises or deliberately promotes 'right' versus 'wrong' choices" (141) but instead presents morally ambiguous perspectives that reflect the complexity of environmental crises. Miyazaki's haunting visual juxtapositions, such as the Ironworks' darkened tendrils of pollution rising against the ancient forest's vibrant green backdrop, reinforce the narrative's environmental themes and ruminations on the seemingly inevitable conflict between mechanised technology and nature. This is evident in the way Miyazaki depicts Iron Town emitting thick smoke and chemical waste during the production of weapons, visually embodying the destructive consequences of industrial progress intruding on the natural world. Thus, this chapter will discuss Miyazaki's visual storytelling techniques, such as the symbolic use of colour, character design, and *mise-en-scène* to highlight the ecological conflicts depicted in the film.

I close this dissertation with insights from the preceding analyses of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), reflecting how these films explore environmental issues and interrogate the idea that humans and nature are separate or in conflict. The conclusion of this dissertation will revisit the main findings while continuing to explore the theoretical and practical implications of Hayao Miyazaki's cinema. The conclusion acknowledges the dissertation's limitations and suggests directions for future research that will hopefully inspire future ecocritics and academics interested in Miyazaki's animist, anti-hierarchical worldview.

To summarise, this dissertation explores the ecocritical dimensions and visual storytelling in Hayao Miyazaki's films *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). A detailed literature review and theoretical framework contextualise Hayao Miyazaki's work within ecocritical discourse, highlighting his unique contribution to environmental themes in animation. Miyazaki presents complex narratives that transcend traditional 'good versus evil' dichotomies by exploring the intricate relationship between humanity and nature. His visual techniques, from vibrant colour palettes to symbolic creature design, draw audiences into a deeper engagement with themes of ecological balance and environmental responsibility.

This dissertation situates Miyazaki's approach within Japanese visual culture and global environmental discourses, recognising his influence on how animated media can address urgent ecological issues. By examining the English adaptations of *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), this dissertation contributes to the academic debate on environmental ethics by exploring how animated narratives can shape perceptions of ecological responsibility. Therefore, this dissertation aims to expand the understanding of how animation can inspire critical reflection on ecological stewardship by bridging cultural perspectives within the broader framework of ecocriticism. This section presents a summary of the introduction of the dissertation and details what is expected in the subsequent chapters that follow. Therefore, this next section is an introduction to Chapter One.

2. Chapter One

2.1 Ruins and Rebirth: Ecological Hope in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984)

2.1.1 Introduction

Hayao Miyazaki's work must be read against the backdrop of Japan's complex, traumatic history with nuclear weapons. The spectres of Hiroshima and Nagasaki exert a powerful hold on the Japanese imagination, and images of violent explosion. Cultural anxieties about nuclear annihilation are certainly not unique to Hayao Miyazaki's oeuvre. The iconoclastic cyberpunk film *Akira* (1988) posits a world in which a teenager's brain could potentially destroy the world,

while other Studio Ghibli films, such as Isao Takahata's exquisite *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), directly engage with the destructive legacy of nuclear fallout. Gwendolyn Morgan (2015, p. 180) notes that "for [Hayao] Miyazaki apocalyptic themes are central to understanding the potential destruction [humanity] can have on the environment". Hayao Miyazaki's oeuvre is filled with startling dystopian themes and apocalyptic imagery, from the potentially lethal flying castle in *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986) to the submerged coastal community at the end of *Ponyo* (2008). Hayao Miyazaki's dystopian aesthetic is clearly evident in the opening sequence of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), which introduces the film's post-apocalyptic setting and immediately foregrounds its central ecological concerns: a destroyed environment portrayed as lifeless and unforgiving. The three scenes analysed in this chapter are 'The Decimated Village', 'Nausicaä's Underground Garden', and 'A New World'

The post-apocalyptic world of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is best understood through Lyman Tower Sargent's concept of the critical dystopia, a narrative space that, despite depictions of widespread devastation, retains "glimmers of hope and the possibility of transformation". While the film is set a millennium after the "Seven Days of Fire" laid waste to industrial civilisation, it avoids totalising despair by portraying the "Sea of Decay" as a site of concealed renewal and planetary purification. This perspective is most vividly articulated in the 'Decimated Village' sequence (Section 2.2.1), which serves as a poignant microcosm of the Anthropocene era. In this scene, the decaying remnants of human structures represent the physical ruins of domesticity and the fading monuments of human ingenuity, now being reclaimed by the agentic power of the Toxic Jungle.

By applying Anna Tsing's (2015, p.1) investigation into the "possibility of life in capitalist ruins", the surreal spectacle of fungi creeping over the carcass of human civilisation can be read as nature actively re-ordering a world that was once dominated by human consumption. This transformation suggests that nature is not a passive backdrop but a living, agentic entity that exerts its own independent power in the wake of human failure. Furthermore, the analysis of 'Nausicaä's Underground Garden' (Section 2.2.2) demonstrates how the protagonist engages in the practice of "staying with the trouble," as defined by Donna Haraway (2016). Rather than seeking to master or destroy the lethal environment, Nausicaä utilises scientific

inquiry to understand the forest's purifying purpose, embodying a relational ethics that prioritises coexistence over conquest.

This approach necessitates a deliberate shift in terminology, adopting Greg Garrard's (2023) concept of the other-than-human to acknowledge the sentient and agentic identity of the Ohmu and the forest flora without reinforcing anthropocentric hierarchies. By refusing to destroy the Toxic Jungle, Nausicaä accepts the entanglements of earthly living and looks for ways to survive collaboratively within a contaminated landscape. In turn, Nausicaä's pacifism functions as a vital form of ecological resistance; by refusing to engage in the militaristic cycle of destruction, she protects the planet's concealed renewal. This pacifism that she exhibits toward the environment demonstrates that true stewardship requires a cessation of anthropocentric violence to allow nature the space to heal itself. Ultimately, these scenes demonstrate that Miyazaki's ruins are not terminal endpoints but productive sites where humanity must learn to witness and respect nature's independent tempo to ensure the possibility of future flourishing.

Finally, the analysis of the subterranean 'New World' (Section 2.2.3) serves as the conceptual culmination of this ecological arc, moving from the visible destruction of the village to a vision of "concealed renewal". By utilising Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Seán Cubitt's (2023) concept of the "re-worlding of the Anthropocene," I investigate how this hidden space functions as an anti-anthropocentric sanctuary where nature initiates its own restorative processes independent of human agency. The shift to a minimalistic blue palette and the presence of colossal crystalline trees, which I compare to the resilient Giant Sequoia Redwoods, visually signify a return to purity that aligns with *Shinto* concepts of physical and moral cleansing. This scene demonstrates that in Miyazaki's critical dystopia, the other-than-human world is not just a site of survival, but an agentic force capable of re-ordering the planet on a scale that quite literally decentres humanity within the frame. Together, these three sequences reveal that while the Anthropocene is marked by human-induced catastrophe, Miyazaki's cinematic vision prioritises the independent tempo and resilient agency of a natural world that will ultimately outlast the human race. This section provides an introduction to what Chapter One entails; therefore, the scenes analysed are discussed in the section below.

2.2 Scenes Analysed

2.2.1 The Decimated Village

This scene opens with “a natural world of browns” (Vacche and Price 2006, p. 135), on a vast and somewhat barren landscape as the ground and surrounding areas are “covered by proliferating clusters” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 109) of pale, ash-like spores and webbings of fungal growth (See Figure 22). The air is thick with brown and greyish dust, limiting the visibility within the shot. In cinema, the colour brown is often “associated with a sense of emotional warmth and the redemptive qualities of the natural world” (Vacche and Price 2006, p. 135). Hayao Miyazaki’s dominant use of brown tones communicates nature’s ‘redemption’ through a “phenomenon of natural resilience” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 48), where the natural world is “actually purifying the Earth’s air and soil by absorbing [the] toxins” (50). These brown hues also convey a sense of decay and emptiness, especially when paired with the sparse *mise-en-scène* and the post-apocalyptic setting.

Hayao Miyazaki’s use of *mise-en-scène* subtly imbues this space with a tangible sense of despair and isolation. Here, he utilises a master shot, which is a shot “taken from a long distance that includes as much of the set or location as possible and all the characters in the scene” (Sikov 2020, p. 221), with a deep depth of field. This means that the image shown on screen has a great “distance between the nearest and farthest objects that are in focus at the same time” (Sikov 2020, p. 218). It is worth noting that images with a deep depth of field (i.e., as much of the image in focus as possible, thereby presenting a clearer image of the entire scene) are considered the best way to capture landscapes, thanks to the enlarged field of view. This shot allows Miyazaki to place the putrefying trees in the foreground of the frame. By doing so, he literally presents the decay of the environment as a focal point to the audience.

A distant silhouette slowly emerges within the frame, visually separated from the decaying environment, which heightens the sense of alienation within the scene. Miyazaki’s use of sound in this scene reinforces this idea. The scene is accompanied by an eerie soundscape of howling winds and the wheezing exhalations of cyst-like spores, an aural tapestry reminiscent of the textured, industrial sound design of early David Lynch films such as *Eraserhead* (1977) and

The Elephant Man (1980). The approaching figures' footfalls almost sound intrusive in this 'alien' landscape. As seen in Figure 22, the approaching figure looks part rider and part beast. In this way, this chimeric figure conflates the human and non-human in its ambiguity. It could be argued that Hayao Miyazaki's depiction of the ambiguous, 'hybrid' rider is an incisive and quintessentially ecocritical link to what is called a "co-existence with our other-than-human relatives" (Justice 2018, p. 39). The mysterious shape sharpens into focus, and it is revealed to be a human rider named Lord Yupa. He sits atop a bulky creature called a "horse-claw" (Miyazaki 2007, p. 128), which resembles a large, prehistoric bird. A second horse-claw trails behind him, laden with provisions for a long journey.

Hayao Miyazaki visually connects humanity to this blighted world: the protective masks worn by the travelling figures (See Figure 23), such as Lord Yupa, evoke images of historical health crises like medieval plagues. These designs specifically recall the distinctive beaked masks worn by 17th-century physicians, which were constructed with elongated, bird-like beaks intended to hold aromatic substances, such as dried flowers and spices, to protect the wearer from miasma. At the time, medical theory incorrectly posited that diseases like the Black Death were transmitted through "bad air" or foul odours rather than germs. By utilising this specific visual motif, Miyazaki grounds the Toxic Jungle's spores in a historical reality of human contagion, signalling a world where the act of breathing itself has become a life-threatening encounter with a diseased environment. This visual correlation suggests a thematic parallel between human disease and the state of the environment, reinforcing the film's status as an ecological warning. The masks' visual correlation with human health crises and pandemics from a previous era is also significant in the broader context of Hayao Miyazaki's ecocritical worldview, suggesting the evolving nature of the natural world and humanity's relationship with the environment.

As Lord Yupa picks his way through the remnants of the ruined village, he passes dead trees covered in fungal growth (See Figure 24). A balloon-like cyst dangling from one of these desiccated trees bursts open, releasing a plume of pinkish grey spores into the air. As seen in Figures 25 and 26, the pink hue of the spores stands out strikingly against the otherwise muted and earth-toned environment. However, due to its subdued and greyish shade, it complements the ashen colour of the fungi that fills the frame and devours the landscape. Cristiana

Barolomei, Alfonso Ippolito and David Mezzino (2023, p. 4) state that “the representation of landscape in Miyazaki’s films goes beyond mere aesthetics and becomes a powerful narrative symbol”. This is evident in Miyazaki’s use of arresting, ‘venomous’ colours to suggest a world inimical to human habitation. In this way, the carefully designed landscape imagery “in the film reflects the impact of human actions on the environment” (9).

In the natural world, such vibrant or unusual colours often function as a biological warning system. This is a concept known as aposematism, which is a biological phenomenon “in nature where an organism’s bright colours signal [danger]” (Lexa 2021, Online). In the context of this scene, Hayao Miyazaki’s decision to represent the spores in shades of greyish pink visually reinforces the presence of airborne toxicity. The spores are a “warning with its distinct [pinkish] colouration” (Lexa 2021, Online), emphasising not only the lethal nature of the environment but also how irrevocably the landscape has been transformed by human-directed contamination.

As Lord Yupa continues riding into the village, Hayao Miyazaki’s strategic use of *mise-en-scène* reveals a world overtaken by even more fungal growths. Figures 25 and 26 present different perspectives on the spread of infectious spores and their subsequent proliferation. The first image (See Figure 25) is a close-up shot of a rotting wooden windmill completely cocooned in fungus and bulging suppurating growths. This close-up is “a shot that isolates an object in the image, making it appear relatively large” (Sikov 2020, p. 217). Hayao Miyazaki’s depiction of an inert windmill engulfed in this all-encompassing overgrowth speaks to a once-sustainable form of energy and human technological prowess now rendered obsolete by environmental degradation. This imagery illustrates the “modern human conceit” (Tsing 2015, p. 19) that nature is merely a passive backdrop for human progress. The all-encompassing overgrowth represents an eruption of “unexpected liveliness” (Tsing 2015, p. 37) that actively re-orders the world following the failure of industrial expansion.

The camera pans down vertically into a low wide-angle shot, which is “a wide horizontal field of view” (Sikov 2020, p. 227), before zooming out to reveal Lord Yupa astride his pack animal, nearing the ancient windmill. Every surface within this frame is enveloped in a network of

fungus with pale webbings and globular spores covering every exterior (See Figure 26). Hayao Miyazaki utilises these structures, such as the windmill, to convey humanity's connection to the natural world. This structure illustrates humanity's utilisation of sustainable and renewable energy sources, as well as its attempts to collaborate with nature rather than exploit the natural world. However, in the context of this scene, these structures are now carcasses or monuments of humanity's efforts and failure to prevent environmental collapse.

The symbolic significance of colour in Hayao Miyazaki's narratives is underscored when Lord Yupa approaches the blasted remnants of a former human dwelling to investigate what has become of this village. Cristiana Barolomei, Alfonso Ippolito and David Mezzino (2023, p. 5) note that Hayao Miyazaki "artistically render[s]" a creative and "suggestive environment that seamlessly blends with the story and emotions of the characters" in this sequence. In Hayao Miyazaki's cinema, the environment is not merely a static, aesthetically pleasing 'stage' upon which human dramas unfold. This is most prominently seen in Lord Yupa's attire. His brown cape closely matches the earth-toned remnants of the house, as both are rendered in similar muted shades (See Figure 27).

This correlation suggests a visual continuity between the character and the natural world. The visual parallel implies a deeper symbolic link between the environment and Lord Yupa. The decaying home, which the Toxic Jungle has engulfed, can be analysed as a metaphor for human civilisation, while Lord Yupa positions himself as a representative of humanity itself. This single home serves as a poignant microcosm of the Anthropocene era, where the physical ruins of domesticity and the fading monuments of human ingenuity are being reclaimed by the agentic power of a natural world that has been irrevocably transformed by humans. However, by framing this scene through Lyman Tower Sargent's concept of the critical dystopia, the viewer can identify essential glimmers of hope and the possibility of transformation amidst the decay. This is portrayed through Lord Yupa's brown cape, which is a removable garment. This seemingly throwaway detail intimates the possibility of change or renewal. Suppose humanity can 'cast off' its destructive tendencies as easily as Lord Yupa can remove his cloak, it may still learn to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016, p. 1) and find a way to coexist with its other-than-human relatives and prevent further ecological collapse.

As Lord Yupa crosses the threshold of this decaying home, he evinces an understanding of the environment as a place of danger. The handheld weapon he carries (See Figure 28), along with the camouflage of his attire, blends in with the environment, reinforcing this idea as oversized insects begin to enter the airspace above the decimated village. Once inside the home, the scene shifts dramatically to near-total darkness, in sharp contrast to the muted yet bright exterior (See Figure 29). The interior is engulfed in deep greens, blacks, and dark blues, with creeping organic matter obscuring the outlines of furniture and other domestic objects (See Figure 30). Anna Dalle Vacche and Brian Price (2006, p. 27) note that in film, dark greens and blues are seen as “tranquil and passive” colours. By contrast, black tones convey affective responses of “fear [,] darkness [...and something] secretive”. As Hayao Miyazaki uses a combination of these colours, the black then alters the “qualities that the colour[s] exemplif[y]” (27).

One particularly poignant moment occurs when Lord Yupa finds a child’s doll near the threshold of the home (See Figure 31). The image of the doll in this scene “epitomises the destruction of innocence and unfairness of war” (Bradley 2015, Online), and in this case, ecocide, which is humanity’s destruction of the natural world. As no one is spared from the wrath of the environment. When Lord Yupa lifts the doll, it disintegrates into dust (See Figure 32). This action conveys a powerful symbol of lost innocence and the fragility of human legacy. The doll is untouched by fungal growth but has still succumbed to environmental decay, suggesting that even symbolic remnants of humanity cannot survive in this toxic world.

As the camera pans over to the right, it becomes apparent that the space is so thoroughly infested with fungal growths that it becomes difficult to distinguish any original structure (See Figure 33). In this sequence, it is evident that nature has not only reclaimed the home but rendered it unrecognisable. This visual transformation suggests that the human-nonhuman relationship has become entirely disintegrated. From an ecocritical perspective, this reclamation by nature “conceives [natural] matter as an agentic entity with an effective and transformative power over human and nonhuman environments” (Oppermann 2016, p. 89). By doing so, this transformation then “reconfigures our understanding” (90) of the natural world as Hayao Miyazaki depicts a world “in which nature still exerts independent power” (Mumcu and Yilmaz 2018, p. 7).

The agential, animist power of nature is embodied in the closing frames of the scene. The scene concludes with the sudden appearance of giant insects. They are monstrous in size and resemble mutated dragonfly creatures, with glowing red eyes and giant maws (See Figures 34 and 35). Their presence can be interpreted as an embodiment of the Toxic Jungle's agency as "the insects of the Toxic Jungle have evolved" (Miyazaki, 1984) to protect their environment. The appearance of these mutated guardians confirms that the landscape is not a site of terminal decay, but what Anna Tsing (2015) identifies as an eruption of "unexpected liveliness and collaborative survival within blasted landscapes" (37). By viewing the village through the lens of "life in capitalist ruins" (1), the scene demonstrates how nature re-orders itself following the failure of the "modern human conceit" (19) of industrial progress. The insects embody an autonomous agency that actively resists human habitation and ensures the fungi forest's ongoingness.

This section provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of Lord Yupa's exploration of a destroyed village taken over by the Toxic Jungle, the discovery he makes and how colour symbolism is used to convey themes of resilience and decay. In summary, the analysis of the 'Decimated Village' provides insight into Hayao Miyazaki's ecocritical worldview, utilising sophisticated visual design and cinematic tools to craft a narrative of environmental despair and transformation. The scene quickly immerses the viewer in a post-apocalyptic atmosphere, characterised by an expansive, sparse setting and a feeling of acute loneliness. The prevailing brown hues within the natural setting serve a dual purpose: they communicate widespread decay and emptiness but also hint at nature's capacity for resilience by indicating the land's purification process through the absorption of contaminants. This palpable sense of alienation is amplified by an eerie soundtrack featuring whistling winds and the gasping sounds produced by cyst-like spores.

The environment is visually defined as extremely hazardous, where airborne toxicity is communicated through the use of colour symbolism. The plumes of greyish-pink spores serve as an aposematic warning, a biological signal of danger that highlights the fundamental alteration of the environment by contamination originating from human activity. Miyazaki visually connects humanity to this blighted world: the protective masks worn by the travelling figures, such as Lord Yupa, evoke images of historical health crises like medieval plagues,

suggesting a thematic parallel between human disease and the state of the environment. Lord Yupa himself is depicted as a chimeric figure, a hybrid rider atop a creature resembling a prehistoric bird, which supports an ecocritical perspective advocating for a necessary co-existence with the other-than-human relatives.

The landscape functions as a testament to humanity's failures and the fragility of its legacy. Structures intended for sustainable living, such as the wooden windmill, are now enveloped entirely by fungal growth, symbolising the abandonment of human technology and efforts in the face of widespread environmental ruin. The devastation reaches a personal level inside a decaying dwelling, which acts as a microcosm of human civilisation being consumed by the toxic environment. A particularly striking moment is the discovery of a child's doll, which disintegrates into dust, powerfully symbolising the destruction of innocence and the transient nature of human legacy in this toxic reality.

While decay is pervasive, a sliver of potential renewal is suggested through Lord Yupa's attire; his brown cape visually links him to the earth-toned ruins of the village and the broader fate of civilisation, but the fact that it is a removable item intimates that humanity might still change its course by casting off its destructive behaviours. Ultimately, the scene emphasises the robust, independent power of nature. The ruined home is completely obscured and rendered unrecognisable by organic matter, illustrating that nature is an agentic entity capable of transforming and reclaiming its environment. This theme of environmental hostility and power culminates in the appearance of monstrous, mutated insects that have evolved to serve as guardians of the Toxic Jungle. Lord Yupa's observation that the Toxic Jungle is destined to absorb the village confirms the landscape's status as a dominant and transformative force that actively resists human habitation. The following scene, discussed below, focuses on Nausicaä's subterranean garden. The analysis states that Nausicaä embodies a scientific expertise and deep compassion for nature, rejecting destruction in favour of understanding the natural world. This next section discusses Nausicaä's underground garden and the real reason for the *Fukai* in the post-apocalyptic world. As this section provides a summary of the analysed scene, the next section examines Nausicaä's Underground Garden, which is presented below.

2.2.2 Nausicaä's Underground Garden

This section highlights the underground garden as a sanctuary and scientific laboratory where Nausicaä discovers that the toxic elements are a result of human pollution, and the dangerous Toxic Jungle is, in fact, purifying the planet. Furthermore, this section explains how Hayao Miyazaki employs filmic techniques, such as colour palette and *mise-en-scène*, to articulate an animist, ecocritical message about the mutual dependence between humanity and the environment. This perspective is framed within the context of Japanese *Shinto* principles, which regard nature as a sentient and sacred space.

In this scene, although not explicitly stated as “natural deities” (Naokazu 1966, p. 49) or portrayed in a visible spiritual form, the flora that Nausicaä cultivates and the subterranean garden she tends to convey reverence for the natural world, nevertheless. Nausicaä is the protagonist and young princess of the Valley of the Wind, residing in a post-apocalyptic world 1,000 years after industrialised civilisation destroyed itself in a cataclysmic war. Her character is inspired by both the healing role of the princess in *The Odyssey* (Homer, trans. Fagles, 1996) and the curiosity of *The Lady Who Loved Insects* (Waley, 1929), from a collection of Japanese tales.

Nausicaä is portrayed as an omniscient figure who embodies both scientific expertise and a deep compassion for nature and its inhabitants. She dedicates herself to scientific inquiry, researching the *Fukai* and the deeper meaning behind the toxic landscape. She rejects the idea of destroying the Sea of Decay and discovers that, while the Toxic Jungle is deadly to humanity, it is, in fact, purifying the world. Hayao Miyazaki presents Nausicaä's devotion to the natural world through a careful use of colour palette, sound design and *mise-en-scène*. In doing so, Miyazaki demonstrates that Nausicaä's “investigations are for the purpose not of controlling the natural world but rather of understanding it” (Napier 2018, p. 65). Through his technical mastery of filmic technique, Hayao Miyazaki renders the underground garden as a site of knowledge and investigation.

Understanding the natural world and living in harmony with it is a concept that Greg Garrard (2023, p. 9) attributes to culture and its relevance to the environment. He notes that nature “is always in some ways culturally constructed”, which means that “nature really exists” as something more than just natural resources for humans to exploit. Hayao Miyazaki’s decidedly animist, ecocritical cinema articulates the complex relationship between the human and non-human world through a variety of filmic techniques. His intentional and thematically dense deployment of *mise-en-scène* and nuanced colour symbolism presents the human/non-human relationship as “mutual[ly] depend[ent]” (Buell 2001, p. 282). This means that cultures and natural environments shape each other in a mutually constitutive, evolving dynamic relationship. Hayao Miyazaki’s unique representations of the natural environment within the specific context of Japanese culture convey a message about how “we are connected to nature, and what we do affects everything down the environmental chain” (Morgan 2015, p. 179).

Within Japanese culture, the natural world holds “particular significance” (Naokazu 1966, p. 43) with the environment considered a sacred, sentient space imbued with life. This reverence towards nature is an essential principle of *Shinto* religious teachings, which stipulate that “everything is in the possession of some spiritual essence” (48). According to *Shinto* scholars, the natural world is inherently imbued with sentience and agency. Regarding this animist belief, it can be noted that nature is also “closely connected with human life” (48) and vice versa. Hayao Miyazaki’s ecological vision encompasses respect for nature and recognition of humanity’s place within it, urging an understanding of natural processes to discern how human activity transforms the earth, whether positively or negatively.

Nausicaä’s underground garden is “in her basement laboratory beneath her father’s castle” (Napier 2018, p. 165). This sanctuary is concealed from the community above and is only accessible to Nausicaä. The scene opens with a wide master shot, which means that it is a shot “taken from a long distance that includes as much of the set or location as possible and all the characters in the scene” (Sikov 2020, p. 221), which is shown in a large room filled with an array of bulky, bioluminescent plants that crowd the space. The flora emits delicate rays of warm light, creating an ethereal atmosphere that diverges from the deeper, cooler hues of the Toxic Jungle (See Figure 36). Although the blues, greens and purples of the Toxic Jungle showcase a calm and peaceful setting, the darker shades hint towards a danger lurking within.

However, Nausicaä's underground garden diverges from those more Cimmerian shades. Instead, Hayao Miyazaki has chosen to use a combination of warm yellows, pale pinks, soft blues, and luminous greens. The harmony of these colours is aesthetically pleasing and symbolises an ideal harmonious relationship between nature and humanity.

Hayao Miyazaki depicts Nausicaä's cultivation of the garden with an observant, respectful 'eye' that mirrors the protagonist's delicate investigations. He achieves this by showcasing the plants with more rounded ends and softer-edged pines, many of which appear delicate in structure yet strong and healthy. A close-up of one specimen, with its gentle spores and pale pink luminescence, reveals that these plant forms themselves are less threatening and less dense than those of the Toxic Jungle (See Figure 37). This contrasting imagery of the *Fukai*'s plants reinforce what Gwendolyn Morgan (2015, p. 179) calls "mutual destruction." This mutuality points towards "our role with nature". She goes on to explain that with "mutual dependence comes mutual destruction" (179). This idea is reinforced by the dangerous world outside of Nausicaä's underground garden. Toxins are rampant in the outside world, courtesy of humankind's pollution and destruction of the Earth, which have forced plants to evolve to survive such a harsh environment. In doing so, they also contribute to the purification of the planet, which is connected to a much larger ecosystem hidden beneath the Toxic Jungle. However, the danger that this Sea of Decay poses to the last remnants of humanity sparks an uprising among militaristic kingdoms, which attempt to destroy the natural world of the *Fukai*. In regard to this, Hayao Miyazaki communicates a message of how "[humans] are connected to nature" (Morgan 2015, p. 179), which means anything humanity does, "affects everything down the environmental chain" (179).

This is most notable in Nausicaä's conversation with Lord Yupa, in which she reveals her discovery that the plants are not innately poisonous; only the environment in which they grow causes such an outcome. She mentions how the soil itself, even beyond the Toxic Jungle, is contaminated. She specifies that a significant amount of pollution has occurred, so much so that "even the topsoil of the Valley is polluted" (Miyazaki, 1984). This secondary discovery highlights how humanity's actions have a lasting and what appears to be irreversible effect on the environment. The scene continues with Nausicaä seated behind a small table in the centre of the frame (See Figure 38). The camera cuts to a close-up of the table, which is cluttered with

test tubes, a paraffin lamp, books, and quills (See Figure 39). Nausicaä's scientific inquiry, which is embodied by her dedicated cultivation of these specimens, is a literal practice of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016, p. 1). By refusing to destroy the forest in favour of understanding its biological purpose, Nausicaä moves beyond the search for a human-centric 'cure'. Instead, she seeks to "become-with" her other-than-human relatives through "multispecies storytelling" focused on "partial recuperation and getting on together" (Haraway 2016, p. 10). This positions her research as an act of responsibility on a damaged Earth.

Nausicaä's pet squirrel-fox, Teto, walks across the table to comfort a disconsolate Nausicaä, who has her head buried in her arms, lying on the table. She is mourning the death of her father, King Jhil of the Valley of the Wind. Nausicaä occupies the centre of the frame, which seems to symbolise the primacy of humanity in the human and non-human dialectic. However, Hayao Miyazaki's construction of spatial tension minimises Nausicaä's presence within the room as the large plants crowd over her. The sheer size of the flora portrays nature's greatness and overwhelming presence compared to that of a minuscule Nausicaä. Her presence is still evident, as her care of the plants showcases them as thriving and healthy, producing "pure air" (Miyazaki 1984). In this use of spatial composition and *mise-en-scène*, Hayao Miyazaki conveys the message of "mutual dependence" (Morgan 2015, p. 179) regarding the human-non-human relationship. Nausicaä learns that "with clean soil and water the plants of the Toxic Jungle are not poisonous" (Miyazaki 1984), meaning that there is a "counterintuitive role that the *Fukai* plays in cleansing [the] toxic world" (Napier 2018, p. 80).

Hayao Miyazaki's *mise-en-scène* is deliberate in how it shows off Nausicaä's knowledge of the plants she is cultivating. He achieves this by presenting the spatial arrangement within the garden as a means to convey Nausicaä's intentionality and scientific approach. Larger floras are placed toward the back of the room, with the smaller plants arranged neatly in front (See Figure 40), suggesting her foresight and intimate knowledge of plant behaviour. However, at the same time, many of these plants dwarf her stature and make her look minute in the laboratory. Glass or ceramic jars containing various plant forms line several workspaces in this underground space (See Figure 41), while Nausicaä's workstation features an array of test tubes in a holder. Hayao Miyazaki's deliberate placement of these instruments indicates that this space functions simultaneously as a botanical laboratory and a sanctuary. The presence of a

rudimentary irrigation system (See Figure 42) with water quietly flowing shows us that this space is an “artificially maintained world” (Napier 2018, p. 175)

An interesting piece of colour symbolism occurs during the conversation between Nausicaä and Lord Yupa. Hayao Miyazaki uses a two-shot as the camera alternates between their faces to capture their dialogue and reactions. This is “a shot in which two people appear, usually in medium distance or closer; two shots are dominated spatially by two people, making them ideal for conversations” (Sikov 2020, p. 226). In these shots, the backgrounds play a subtle but important role in conveying each character’s perspective and relationship with the natural world. Although Lord Yupa expresses sympathy for Nausicaä and a desire to protect the people of the Valley, it becomes evident that his understanding of the Toxic Jungle remains incomplete and tinged with scepticism. Behind him and Nausicaä are various glowing plants in different shades of blue and green. However, the background plants behind Lord Yupa glow in a cooler yellow tone, which gives off a bluish tinge with very few specks of green (See Figure 43). This cool tone evokes “a sense of emotional detachment or distance” (Vacche and Price 2006, p. 135). The array of cool colours can be viewed as Hayao Miyazaki’s portrayal of how Lord Yupa, and by extension other characters in the film, have a somewhat disconnected view of the Toxic Jungle, which has been shaped by fear and long-held beliefs about its threat. However, the yellowish glow and specks of green symbolise “wisdom [and] light” (27), which hints at a formulation of understanding regarding the deeper meaning of the Toxic Jungle.

Compared to Nausicaä, the plants behind her glow much more brightly with warmer undertones (See Figure 44). The colours range from varying shades of green to splashes of bright colour. Broken down, each colour conveys Nausicaä’s level of understanding of the environment. Anna Vacche and Brian Price (2006, p. 27) note how the colour green “recalls the garb of Nature, the outdoors [and] freedom” which symbolises Nausicaä’s deeper connection to the natural world. Including her unrestricted view of how the environment functions in regard to the pollution on the earth. Blue “is suggestive of truth, calm, serenity, hope [and] science” (27). This links directly to Nausicaä’s underground garden and her discovery of the real purpose of the *Fukai*. The contrasting colour schemes behind the characters also subtly communicate the ideological gap between them. One character is tentative and learning, while the other is already in harmony with nature. Having discussed Nausicaä’s discovery of the true biological

process of the Sea of Decay and how colour symbolism and spatial tension play a role in portraying Nausicaä and Lord Yupa's perception of the environment, the next section provides a summary of the analysis of this scene, which is presented below.

In summary, this analysis of Nausicaä's underground garden supports its significance as a focal point within the film, serving both as a personal sanctuary and a functional site for scientific investigation. The section establishes Nausicaä as an omniscient figure whose dedication combines expertise with thoughtful compassion for the natural world. Her subterranean laboratory, concealed beneath her father's castle, becomes the setting where she discovers the crucial truth: the plants of the Toxic Jungle are purifying the world, and their toxicity only arises from growing in the heavily contaminated environment. Miyazaki utilises masterful filmic techniques, including careful colour palette and *mise-en-scène*, to articulate his ecological vision. The garden itself is rendered in luminous, warm hues, symbolising an ideal state of harmony between humanity and nature, which starkly contrasts with the dangerous yet purifying world outside.

Furthermore, the spatial composition within the garden often minimises Nausicaä's physical presence compared to the massive flora, visually conveying nature's immense scale and greatness. Drawing on Japanese culture and *Shinto* beliefs, which view the environment as a sacred and sentient space imbued with spiritual essence, Miyazaki's cinema emphasises the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. This scene highlights that this relationship is a dynamic, evolving process where cultures and natural environments mutually shape one another. This leads to the critical realisation of 'mutual dependence', a concept Miyazaki employs to navigate the ethical tension between symbiosis and parasitism. While the militaristic kingdoms in *Nausicaä* and the industrial expansionists in *Princess Mononoke* initially treat humanity as "parasites feeding off the earth" (Bashveer 2023, p. 4295), a parasitic relationship marked by resource extraction and environmental violence, Miyazaki utilises spaces like the 'Underground Garden' to offer the promise of a symbiotic alternative. These scenes suggest that human survival need not be inherently parasitic; instead, through a relational ontology, humanity can transition from an external agent of destruction to a witness and participant in nature's autonomous healing. By deciphering the Toxic Jungle's purifying purpose, Nausicaä transforms the human role from one of extraction to one of ecological

stewardship, presenting a vision in which coexistence is a mutually flourishing symbiosis rather than a terminal parasitic encounter. Ultimately, both films offer the possibility that while humanity's current path is parasitic, a shift in consciousness toward nature's other-than-human agency can facilitate a return to symbiotic balance.

Ultimately, this section provided a detailed analysis of how Nausicaä's work in the garden represents an embrace of understanding natural processes rather than seeking control over them. By revealing the plants' role in cleansing the toxic landscape, the film delivers a powerful message about recognising humanity's place within the ecosystem and the possibility of repairing a post-cataclysmic world, provided humanity respects the counterintuitive yet essential role of the natural world. The analysis of Nausicaä's underground garden provides insight into a hidden process of the Toxic Jungle. As this section provides a summary of 'Nausicaä's Underground Garden', the next section expands on the purification process and how the planet is healing itself, independent of human intervention. The following section provides a detailed discussion on the hidden world beneath the Toxic Jungle and how this new space is essentially anti-anthropocentric as it restores the planet.

2.2.3 A New World

This section focuses specifically on Hayao Miyazaki's use of colour symbolism and filmic techniques to convey ecological themes. It examines how Miyazaki employs blue tones in the subterranean 'New World' to symbolise hope, concealed renewal, and purification, contrasting sharply with the threatening colours of the Toxic Jungle above. The term 'concealed renewal' refers to the autonomous, subterranean biological processes, such as the filtration of water through petrified tree trunks, that purify the planet independently of human intervention. It is 'concealed' because it occurs beneath the surface of the Toxic Jungle, remaining invisible to those who view nature only through a lens of fear or utility. Hayao Miyazaki's depiction aligns with Anna Tsing's investigation into the "possibility of life in capitalist ruins" (2015, p. 1), suggesting that the Toxic Jungle is not a site of finality but a resilient reconfiguration of a damaged planet.

This analysis particularly highlights the decentring of humanity through *mise-en-scène* and camera work, such as the low-angle shots of immense crystal-like trees, which reinforce the concept of the “re-worlding of the Anthropocene” (Rust, Monani, and Cubitt 2023, p. 111). Furthermore, the analysis connects the film’s imagery to real-world biology, comparing the colossal trees to Giant Sequoia Redwoods to underscore nature’s resilient, autonomous healing process, which is also linked to *Shinto* concepts of spiritual and physical purity. The significance of this silence lies in its rejection of anthropocentric control; it signifies that the most vital restorative processes of the planet occur independently of human agency or management. This silence stands in stark contrast to the destructive ‘noise’ of industrial expansion and militarism depicted on the surface, marking a transition toward nature’s own independent tempo. Furthermore, this silence aligns with *Shinto* principles of purification, suggesting that the physical and moral cleansing of the earth is a sacred act that transcends the limits of human language and observation. By acting silently, the natural world effectively decentres humanity, proving that the planet’s ultimate survival depends on an other-than-human agency that persists long after human ingenuity has failed. Ultimately, this section argues that Miyazaki constructs a coherent ecological arc, shifting from environmental catastrophe to silent, concealed renewal, and urging the audience to reflect on their relationship with the natural world.

In Japanese culture, Japanese speakers maintain a refined sensitivity to blue tones where they often “distinguish light blue (*mizuiro*) from blue (*ao*)” (Athanasopoulos, Damjanovic, Krajciova and Sasaki 2011, p. 15). However, “depending on how [the colour blue] is being used in the [film]” (Fallon 2014, p. 26), the hue can carry multiple symbolic meanings, including “hope, renewal, and the promise of a new beginning” (Walker 2024, Online). Hayao Miyazaki’s use of colour demonstrates deliberate intention in each scene of the selected films. In this scene, Hayao Miyazaki conveys ecological messages of the natural world and the human-non-human relationship. In this scene, which takes place beneath the Toxic Jungle, Hayao Miyazaki shifts the perception of the *Fukai* from a hostile and dangerous place to a site of restoration and healing, imbuing it with a sense of tranquillity. He achieves this through his use of a “minimalistic palette composed entirely in shades of [cool, light] blue” (Cavallaro 2006, p. 61). This shift of perspective happens after the characters, Nausicaä and Asbel, plunge through the ground of the *Fukai*, where they land in “a subterranean [cavern] of huge trees” (50).

Hayao Miyazaki's use of cool blues, soft whites and silver undertones creates a "crystalline world" (Napier 2018, p. 166) in which Nausicaä and Asbel find themselves (See Figure 45). This colour palette starkly contrasts with the Toxic Jungle above, in which Hayao Miyazaki uses a "blue and purple palette, mixed with occasional flashes of red" (Napier 2018, p. 76), with tightly packed flora to convey a feeling of "physical danger" (164) within its dark depths. Compared to the openness and lighter hues used in the subterranean space, the viewer can visually see how Hayao Miyazaki creates a distinction between these two areas of the Toxic Jungle. The space above is actually "anchored to the branches of [the] subterranean canopy of huge trees" (Cavallaro 2006, p. 50) below. This 'anchoring' reinforces a connection between the two areas, which Nausicaä notes they simultaneously exist and work together to "purify the earth of all the pollution that humans have made" (Miyazaki, 1984). Here, the light blue, white and silver hues go hand in hand with Nausicaä's comment, as these colours communicate a sense of "peace and purity" (Napier 2018, p. 166) within the space.

Hayao Miyazaki conveys the strength of nature and the decentralisation of humanity in the environment through his calculated use of *mise-en-scène*. After Nausicaä and Asbel fall beneath the Toxic Jungle, the camera tilts upwards to show a large plateau of colossal, glass-like dead trees, which are light blue in colour with silver highlights (See Figure 46). In regard to the blue being a lighter shade, almost "as a dim [and weak] light, such as the blue of dusk" (Fallon 2014, p. 26), while being used within the subterranean, symbolises an "idea of secrecy that can lead to a feeling of introversion" (Fallon 2014, p. 26). This is fitting in regard to the scene, as the human world has no knowledge of this underground ecosystem. As the camera continues its vertical pan, the sheer immensity of the space of this underground cave is revealed. Hayao Miyazaki's use of a low-angle shot, which is taken from "a camera that is positioned much lower than the subject being filmed, so that the effect is that of looking up at the subject" (Sikov 2020, p. 220), places emphasis on the size of the space. Once the camera reaches the gap through which the characters fell, the light shining down through it resembles that of a pale, yet bright, yellow sun suspended in a blue and silver-speckled sky of the underground cave (See Figure 47).

This moment contributes to what Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Seán Cubitt (2023, p. 111) call the "re-worlding of the Anthropocene". Here, nature works silently in the background,

creating a new world set apart from humanity. Where nature begins to heal from humanity's destruction of the environment. This resilience of the natural world highlights nature's own "incredible ability" (Bartolomei, Ippolito and Mezzino 2023, p. 2) to "regenerate and find balance even in extreme situations" (9), without human agency or interference. Within this scene, Hayao Miyazaki uses "blue in an expanse" (Fallon 2014, p. 26) from the ground to the branches. In doing so, Hayao Miyazaki reinforces the creation of this 'new world'. In cinema, this "expansive blue" is often associated with ideas of "truth [and] honesty", which, in regard to the presence of Nausicaä and Asbel, symbolises the characters discovering the truth about the Toxic Jungle, which ultimately reconfigures their understanding of their environment.

Hayao Miyazaki reinforces this re-worlding in two ways. The first is the presence of clear, filtered water, which gradually flows down multiple massive waterfalls and into a gentle, moving stream before dividing into tributaries which extend beyond what the eye can see (See Figures 48 and 49). Here, nature is tending to itself and is healing from the inside out. The flowing water in this scene is a cool blue, most likely reflecting the light and blue surfaces within the cavern. As "blue [is] being used, or being seen, as water" (Fallon 2014, p. 27), it symbolises or creates "feelings of awakening." In this sense, Hayao Miyazaki portrays water as the life force of this space, an underground 'well of life' that, over time, will 'awaken' the decaying environment above and ultimately lend aid to the restoration of the planet.

Secondly, Hayao Miyazaki's *mise-en-scène* quite literally decentres humanity within the frame. This becomes most apparent when the camera shifts from the vertical upward pan to a tracking shot of Nausicaä navigating the underground space. Rather than foregrounding her body in its entirety, Hayao Miyazaki uses a medium shot which partially frames her torso and head (See Figure 50). This framing minimises her presence within the immensity of the environment, while the crystalline trees tower above Nausicaä and visually dwarf her within the frame. Hayao Miyazaki's use of this specific spatial composition not only displaces humanity from the centre of the narrative, but it also reconfigures the viewer's perspective. Hayao Miyazaki achieves this by aligning the audience's view with a scale that extends beyond the human.

This visual framing conveys a figurative and literal decentring of humanity within nature, presenting the space as an anti-anthropocentric vision where ecological processes and the natural world displace human dominance. The scene continues as Nausicaä explores this hidden space. There is no background music during the first half minute as she takes in her surroundings. Instead, what is heard are the ambient sounds from within the environment. Hayao Miyazaki's decision to incorporate diegetic sound effectively reinforces the presence of the natural world in this scene. By doing so, he conveys more auditory information and "emotional momentum" (Cavallaro 2006, p. 53). It is a point of view "which show[s] the audience what characters perceive" (53), which means the viewer is called to be an active part of the scene.

The colossal crystalline trees in this scene look strikingly similar to the Giant Sequoia Redwoods (See Figure 51), which are trees "of great size" (Betts 1959, p. 1) and grow "taller than any other tree species in the world" (Olson, Roy, and Walters n.d, p. 546). The ecological function of the Giant Sequoia Redwoods encompasses various physiological processes, including carbon assimilation and the creation and maintenance of balance in the ecosystems in which they grow. The Giant Redwoods also have extremely dense trunks and thick foliage on the upper crowns. In regard to this, Nick Robinson (2024, Online) notes that because of the sheer immensity and density of these trees, they are able to produce "up to 260 pounds (117.93 kilograms) of oxygen every year", which is "enough oxygen for [two to three] people to breathe for an entire year".

The dead trees in this scene have almost perfectly cylindrical-shaped trunks with branches also only on the crowns, which is "the floor" of the Toxic jungle. This small detail reveals that only part of the trees, specifically the tree trunks, are petrified. Even so, "water is still flowing through it" (Miyazaki, 1984). The resemblance to Giant Sequoia Redwoods is significant, as this species is often regarded as a vessel of life due to its hydrological processes, which play a key role in maintaining equilibrium within the environment. The flowing water in the tree trunks reinforces the idea of these trees as vessels for life within a damaged and dying planet, mimicking the natural process where "[r]edwood canopies and leaves effectively strip moisture from an air mass" (Roden, Johnstone and Dawson 2009, p. 189). This stripping action leads to "condensation and fog drip from tree crowns [which is] an increased soil moisture supply

during the dry summers” (Olson, Roy, and Walters n.d, p. 542). However, the trees in the underground space almost seem to absorb the moisture from the Toxic Jungle and purify it as it flows through the tree trunks and into the ground below. This capacity to capture moisture is important as it regulates “ecosystem function” (Roden, Johnstone and Dawson 2009, p. 189), creating clean streams of filtered water in the underground space.

The discovery of this subterranean sanctuary provides the glimmer of hope that distinguishes Miyazaki’s work as a “critical dystopia” (Sargent 2022, p. 743). While traditional dystopian narratives often culminate in “totalising despair”, the New World reveals a “possibility of transformation” through nature’s autonomous purifying agency (25). This confirms that the narrative does not simply serve as a warning of a bleak future, but functions as a form of “social dreaming” (7) that envisions a radically different ecological order even amidst systemic environmental collapse. By portraying nature as an entity that initiates its own restorative processes independent of human interference, Miyazaki aligns with Sargent’s (2022) argument that the “imperfect, critical utopia... is the only one we can trust” because it encourages the audience to “envision and struggle for betterment” (ii).

While the branches of these dead trees anchor the ground of the Toxic Jungle, a space that is very much alive, it gives us insight into this planetary process of purification. Nausicaä concludes that “the trees of the Toxic Jungle must have evolved to purify the earth of all the pollution that humans have made” (Miyazaki, 1984). This purification is a concept that Gwendolyn Morgan (2015, p. 175) argues is a part of a cycle to create a new world. She notes that “[w]hen humanity disconnects from nature” in ways such as the apocalyptic Seven Days of Fire, humanity becomes a “witness [and victim to] nature’s wrath”. This wrath is embodied in the emergence of the *Fukai*, which is then seen as “a return to purity” (175), which is portrayed through the hidden ecological process of the subterranean space.

This purification also has a spiritual connotation. In *Shinto* religion, purification is “an action showing respect to the spirits” (Morgan 2018, p. 175) of the natural environment. As mentioned earlier in this chapter during the discussion of Nausicaä’s underground garden, there is no visible portrayal of these spirits, yet the environment is still imbued with agency. Hayao

Miyazaki portrays this purification as a process that mimics that of “*Shinto* practitioners” (175) who “engage in a process of purification, wiping themselves clean morally and physically” (175). This physical purity is linked to Hayao Miyazaki’s ‘re-worlding’ of a damaged environment, one devoid of human agency.

The Giant Sequoia Redwood has a notable resistance to diseases, which is why Hayao Miyazaki’s design choice for the gargantuan dead trees fits extremely well in relation to the toxicity of the *Fukai* and the poisonous fungal spores and growths. Harold Scofield Betts (1959, p. 1) notes that this species of Redwood has a “remarkable vitality” which allows it to “survive a wide range of catastrophes [...] including decay-producing fungi”. In regard to this, Hayao Miyazaki utilises these trees to showcase how they, in conjunction with the *Fukai*, purify the pollution caused by humanity and create a space “where [the characters] are able to breathe unpolluted air and walk freely” (Napier 2018, p. 166). This idea is reinforced through the characters’ lack of masks or protective gear in the scene. This ‘New World’ underscores the healing and resilience of the natural world as it goes about re-worlding an inherently anthropocentric space. Having discussed the ecological function of this ‘New World’ and how these giant trees are reminiscent of the resilient Sequoia Redwoods, the following section provides an overview of Chapter One as a whole.

To summarise, this comprehensive analysis of the selected scenes from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) establishes that Hayao Miyazaki constructs a deliberate ecological arc. This narrative progression moves from initial environmental destruction to a growing comprehension of nature’s processes, culminating in a final stage of concealed renewal. Miyazaki successfully conveys these ecological principles and the complexities of the human-non-human relationship through his calculated use of specific filmic elements, including colour symbolism and *mise-en-scène*.

The early depiction of the decimated village serves as a poignant foreshadowing, illustrating the severe consequences of humanity’s negligence toward the natural world. Here, the use of brown and ashen palettes transforms familiar human structures into stark memorials of a severed relationship with the environment. In contrast, Nausicaä’s underground garden

reframes humanity's potential role from one of conquest to one of learning, advocating for reciprocity and patience. This sanctuary, revealed through warm undertones and soft lighting, makes clear that mutual dependence implies both the risk of mutual damage and the possibility of mutual repair. The ultimate realisation of planetary recovery is found beneath the Toxic Jungle, a space Hayao Miyazaki portrays using a minimalistic palette of cool, light blue tones, soft whites, and silver highlights. This subterranean cavern completes the conceptual "re-worlding of the Anthropocene" (Rust, Monani, and Cubitt 2023, p. 111), establishing an anti-anthropocentric environment where nature acts silently and autonomously to heal itself.

The expansive use of blue in this scene signifies truth, honesty, and purification, while the gargantuan, crystalline trees, which resemble Giant Sequoia Redwoods in their size and function, act as critical vessels of life, exhibiting a "remarkable vitality" that allows them to withstand decay-producing fungi. They purify the pollution generated by humanity, with clean, filtered water flowing through their petrified trunks and throughout the cavern. This process of purification aligns with *Shinto* principles of moral and physical cleansing, connecting the ecological restoration of the damaged planet to a spiritual act devoid of human control. Within this restored space, humanity is spatially diminished and *decentred*. Hayao Miyazaki's framing techniques visually dwarf the characters, forcing the audience to adopt a perspective scaled to the immensity of the natural world.

In synthesis, these scenes articulate a coherent argument: humanity must step back and witness the natural environment's independent tempo and purpose. Survival does not rely on conquering the Toxic Jungle or the *Fukai*, but on learning from it. By presenting this sophisticated ecological viewpoint, Hayao Miyazaki invites reflection on our critical relationship with the environment and the imperative of its preservation for subsequent generations. As this concludes Chapter One's analysis of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), the following section, Chapter Two, provides a detailed discussion and analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

3. Chapter Two

3.1 Between Curse and Cure: Ashitaka's Encounters with Sacred Nature in *Princess Mononoke* (1997)

3.1.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an ecocritical analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's film *Princess Mononoke* (1997), by examining how the narrative challenges anthropocentric perspectives by portraying nature as a dynamic, effective, and autonomous force. This chapter analyses two key scenes from Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997). These scenes are the boar god Nago's curse and Ashitaka's first encounter with the Forest Spirit. This chapter explores concepts such as the other-than-human and Timothy Morton's mesh, where boundaries between life forms are blurred due to ecological entanglement. The analysis also positions characters like Ashitaka and San as liminal figures or 'bridges' who embody an ideal, non-hierarchical relationship with the environment and its deities, contrasting with the destructive greed of Iron Town. It examines the central conflict between human industrial expansion, specifically iron production, and the natural world, arguing that the film emphasises the necessity of sustainability and coexistence to prevent human self-destruction.

The opening scene of the film begins "squarely in the realm of the nonhuman" (Napier 2018, p. 178), somewhere in the Ancient Forest where fantastic beasts and *kami* dwell within its depths. From an ecocritical standpoint, the term 'nonhuman' "implies lack or failure" (Garrad 2023, p. xii), which in turn suggests a hierarchical order of some kind. One being humanity at the top, while nature is being used only as a resource for human consumption. Greg Garrad (2023, p. xxi) suggests that ecocritics should instead use the "portmanteau adjective 'other-than-human'" or even consider using ecofeminist Val Plumwood's term of Earth-other to refer to "beings that are not human". In doing so, readers and scholars acknowledge that humanity and nature are not "distinct domains in a hierarchical relationship" (17). Instead, these two realms of humanity and the other-than-human are interconnected with one another and should be viewed as "provisional fictions that are thoroughly interwoven" (17).

However, it does not mean that nature is passive or just a “mere visual background” (Bartolomei, Ippito and Mezzino 2023, p. 2) in this interconnected relationship. Hayao Miyazaki’s brilliant storytelling portrays nature as an active force. This is seen from the opening scene and throughout *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The central narrative of the film “concerns the tensions between iron production, for items such as firearms, and how this impacts [...] natural resources [and] the habitat of different species and the landscape” (Chan 2015, p. 95). Hayao Miyazaki uses this conflict to further depict nature as an extremely “powerful, agentic and creative” (Plumwood, Online) force through nature’s retaliation against the destruction of the natural environment.

By doing so, Miyazaki paints a vivid environmental image of how “sustainability and coexistence between humans and nature” (Bartolomei, Ippito and Mezzino 2023, p. 2) is essential for the survival of humanity, as Hayao Miyazaki emphasises how humanity’s “destruction of nature can only end in self-destruction” (Zhang 2024, p. 65). Hayao Miyazaki conveys this concept through Ashitaka’s curse, where “the wounds inflicted by humans” (Bartolomei, Ippito and Mezzino 2023, p. 2) create a snowball effect where destructive actions bear consequences for all those involved, the human and other-than-human. From an Ecocritical perspective, Hayao Miyazaki situates this scene as a direct opposition to anthropocentric perspectives, illustrating this idea in the film’s opening scene. Where the environment and its other-than-human inhabitants are soon to be under the “dominance of human collectivities” (Napier 2001, p. 178) as *Tatara*, which is known as Iron Town in its English translation, encroaches upon the natural world. The humans of this town tear up the trees from the Ancient Forest and blast the mountains into dust to “mine iron ore to make armaments” (179). Lady Eboshi uses an iron musket to “wound Nago, transforming him from a god into a demon driven by hatred and vengeance” (Zhang 2024, p. 58). In his maddened state, he “infects anything he touches so that healthy vegetation withers and dies in his wake” (58). As this section provides an introduction of Chapter Two, this next section presents detailed commentary and an analysis of two scenes from *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

3.2 Scenes Analysed

3.2.1 The Boar gods' Demon Curse

In this opening scene, Hayao Miyazaki's use of colour and narrative immediately "places the audience in a liminal, mythic space" (Napier 2018, p. 178). The inclusion of ethereal deities, such as "giant talking wolves, boar, and apes" (Newell 2013, p. 82), reinforces the landscape as a "site of awe and wonder" (Chan 2015, p. 94). However, as a corrupted demon boar god comes barrelling onto the frame (See Figure 52), Hayao Miyazaki also places this wondrous world, "as a site of resistance, and even of attack" (Napier 2001, p. 178), against humanity and its obliteration of the natural world. Set during the Muromachi period or in a "medieval setting" (179), humanity exists as a foe to the natural world. Hayao Miyazaki's use of this timeline reinforces his belief in a time when humanity and nature were in harmony with each other. However, humanity's greed began to destroy the "external landscape of Japan [and also] the interior spiritual landscape of its citizens" (Napier 2018, p. 200).

The scene begins with a wide-angle shot of sparsely snowcapped mountains, covered in a thick blanket of mist (See Figure 53). It is a static shot for a few seconds with the words, "in ancient times, the land lay covered in forests where from ages long past dwelt the spirits of the gods" (Nakajima 1997, p. 1), superimposed on the screen (See Figure 54). Superimposing is "a special effect in which there are two or more images visible onscreen at the same time" (Sikov 2020, p. 225). The text, superimposed on screen, is written in Japanese in both the English and Japanese versions of *Princess Mononoke* (1997). However, Nakajima has created an English version of the Japanese script to help viewers better understand the Japanese language, if they so desire. The limited visibility in this scene conveys what Timothy Morton (2007, p. 64) refers to as the "uncanny" of nature. This is related to the unusual nature of the scene setting. The camera pans down vertically and descends into the haze as the frame dissolves into the depths of the mountains and into a space densely packed with large trees and foliage in a palette of "deep greens and browns" (Napier 2018, p. 187). As the camera continues to show the audience "a positive description of the surrounding world" (Morton 2007, p. 85), the dark hues and towering shadows of the trees convey "an uncanny sense of something lurking" (85), just beyond the audience's knowledge of what Hayao Miyazaki shows on screen. Hayao Miyazaki reinforces this idea of the 'unfamiliar nature' as a voice-over by Keith David begins to tell us

of a time when nature and humans lived in harmony, with “lands covered in forests” (Miyazaki 1997), and where ancient gods and deities reside. However, it is now a time of gods and demons as humanity has destroyed much of these forests. Hayao Miyazaki foreshadows what is about to happen and sets the stage for the tension between nature and humanity.

The scene continues with a slow camera movement, deliberately showcasing the immensity of the trees as they occupy nearly all the space within the frame. The non-diegetic music sets a sense of foreboding and unease, with a crescendo of crashing sound as the camera ‘drops’ to the forest floor. The visibility in the frame is limited, with ground mist covering the plants and undergrowth. The camera comes into focus on an unidentifiable figure, which the audience soon comes to realise is the boar god Nago, hulking through the forest as he slips between shadows. His large, monstrous body topples a tree over as it moves out of frame. The scene cuts to a close-up of lush green grass and moss, interrupted by an enormous hoof-like limb slamming down into the ground as hideous, black worm-like creatures wriggle and break out from his skin (See Figure 55). As Nago steps forward and out of frame, the ground beneath his grotesque hoof turns a sickly brown colour as the grass and surrounding plants promptly wither and die (See Figure 56).

Hayao Miyazaki’s use of extreme spatial composition evokes a sense of fear, particularly a fear of the unknown. The audience, at first glance, cannot know for sure what this figure may be, if it is an animal, a human or something ‘other’. Yet, the brief shot of the boar’s hoof in frame shows this figure “as something that is both unfamiliar yet eerily familiar” (Napier 2001, p. 186). Hayao Miyazaki’s portrayal of the infected boar god as decidedly ‘other’ places the natural world and all of its inhabitants as “uncanny opposition to the civilisation of *Tatara*” (186), which Hayao Miyazaki uses to contest the idea of anthropomorphism. Ecocritically, “[a]nthropomorphism necessarily sees the natural world through an anthropocentric lens that establishes humanity as the barometer for normative values and affirms the centrality of human life” (Bruckner 2010, p. 188). This paradigm is criticised for viewing natural landscapes “in terms of human needs and desires, rather than whole ecosystems”. The unfamiliar figure weaving through the Ancient Forest directly challenges anthropomorphic tendencies by portraying the strangeness of the ‘other’, which in turn “wakes the human audience to its proximity to, and intimacy and interdependence with, the natural world” (Napier 2018, p. 188).

The scene then cuts to Ashitaka riding upon Yakul towards the edge of the forest, where he encounters the boar god, as Nago ‘erupts’ from the forest in a moving black mass (See Figures 57 and 58). This eruption can be read as a literal explosion of nature’s agency and retaliation against humanity’s aggression and greed. As seen in Figure 59, this creature bears no resemblance to a boar or an ethereal deity. Instead, the figure seen barrelling toward Ashitaka and the village is a writhing black creature with beady red eyes. Its heaving mass is supported by four limbs on each side of its body. The scene continues with Ashitaka aiming with his bow and arrow and ultimately ends up killing Nago, but not before he makes contact with the curse inflicted upon the boar god, which brands itself onto Ashitaka’s arm. He releases his arrow into Nago’s eye and a second arrow into his skull. Nago falls to the ground, and the twisting black maggot-like creatures cease to exist. They drop off the boar god’s body and burn the grass and surrounding plants as they cascade down and off his form (See figure 60). With his final breath, Nago warns the humans, “soon all of you will feel my hate and suffer as I have suffered” (Miyazaki, 1997). He dies and his body decomposes like vapour, leaving behind his skeletal remains and the surrounding area he lies upon in a state of decay (See Figure 61).

This grotesque image can be attributed to Timothy Morton’s (2011, p. 19) ecocritical concept of the mesh, which is a culmination of “biocentric ideas such as the web of life” (22), and challenges the anthropocentric tendency to treat humans as separate from nature. Within this framework, the “boundaries between life-forms are never rigid and thin; rather, they are wide and permeable” (22), including the distinction “between living and non-living forms” (22). This notion is vividly dramatized through Ashitaka’s curse and the iron bullet lodged in Nago’s body. The curse turns Nago into a *tatarigami*, which is a violent god or a demon god, filling him with hate and rage. Hayao Miyazaki’s depiction of the iron bullet lodged in Nago’s body visually portrays how a human-made object, the bullet, becomes inseparable from the creature’s flesh, blurring the line between the animate and the inanimate. In this way, the film visualises Timothy Morton’s claim that the distinction “between living and non-living forms” (22) collapses within the ecological mesh.

When the curse merges with Ashitaka’s body, it takes on a life of its own as it writhes and blisters across his arm. The corruption, represented by the burning of Ashitaka’s flesh and the black-goo substance, seeps into his body, visually demonstrating the “permeable” (22)

boundary between life-forms. However, Hayao Miyazaki also complicates this relationship by showing its destructive potential. The violence humanity directs toward nature does not remain external but circulates back through the mesh, infecting human life itself. According to Japanese myth, the curse by the *Tatari*, which is a demonic spirit, represents the belief that “when humans are aggressive against the forest [,] the forest god tortures humans in return” (Mayumia, Solomon and Chang 2005, p. 4). Therefore, the curse can be viewed as a literal and symbolic embodiment of ecological entanglement and the moral consequences of humanity’s actions against nature. Nago’s death, as an entity of the Ancient Forest, is part of a significant disturbance which tips the balance of the natural environment. Here, Hayao Miyazaki illustrates what is known as a “regime shift” (Folke 2006, p. 259), or a transition between “alternative stable states” (Gunderson 2000, p. 425).

This transition means that the ecosystem moves to a “less desirable” (Folke 2006, p. 257) condition as it loses its “capacity to sustain [its] natural resources” (257). These changes within and to the natural world are often “sharp and dramatic” (257), as seen by the near instantaneous death and decomposition of the boar god and the surrounding area he has rampaged through. Hayao Miyazaki uses Nago’s death and destruction to reinforce the extreme violence and chaos which humanity inflicts upon the natural environment. The destruction is so severe that, within that moment, nature loses its “capacity [as] a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing [extreme] change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks” (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, and Kinzig 2004, p. 6). This section provided a detailed ecocritical analysis of the boar god, Nago’s, curse and how it affected Ashitaka and the natural environment. An overview for the entirety of the analysed scene is provided below.

The preceding analysis of the opening scene in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), underscores Hayao Miyazaki’s complex exploration of the conflict between ancient, powerful nature and destructive human civilisation. By establishing a liminal and mythical space populated by ethereal deities, the narrative quickly shifts this world of awe into a battleground, representing the natural world’s resistance to humanity’s destruction of the environment. The visual presentation of the corrupted boar god Nago, transformed into a terrifying, writhing creature, serves as a potent metaphor for nature’s justifiable rage and agency against human greed. The

use of shadowy, limited visibility and grotesque imagery, particularly the sight of the infected boar, creates a sense of the ‘uncanny,’ challenging viewers to acknowledge something both strange and unsettlingly familiar. This insistence on portraying the unfamiliar ‘other’ directly contests anthropocentrism, prompting the human audience to recognise their proximity, intimacy, and fundamental interdependence with the natural environment.

Ecocritically, the film vividly dramatises ecological entanglement through the concept of the mesh, demonstrating that the boundaries between life-forms are wide and permeable. This is strikingly visualised by the iron bullet, which is a human-made object, being inseparable from Nago’s flesh, thereby blurring the distinction between the animate and the inanimate. Furthermore, the corruption brands itself onto Ashitaka’s arm, visually confirming that the violence humanity directs towards nature inevitably circulates back, infecting human life itself. This dynamic embodies the belief in Japanese myth that aggressive human actions against the forest will result in retribution from the forest god.

Ultimately, Nago’s instantaneous death and subsequent decomposition represent a catastrophic ecological tipping point. This disturbance is characterised as a ‘regime shift’, signifying a rapid transition toward a “less desirable” (Folke 2006, p. 257) state where the ecosystem loses its foundational capacity to sustain its natural resources and absorb extreme change. Through this depiction of widespread decay and violence, Hayao Miyazaki delivers a powerful statement on the extreme chaos that humanity inflicts upon the environment. This next section details Ashitaka’s encounter with the divine. He meets the *Kodama*, and through their interaction, Miyazaki portrays Ashitaka as a mediator between the human and nonhuman worlds. As this section summarises Ashitaka’s encounter with a demon, the following section provides an analysis of Ashitaka’s encounter with the divine.

3.2.2 Ashitaka encounters the Forest Spirit and *Kodama*

Throughout the narrative, the audience encounters various supernatural beings of the Ancient Forest. These beings include deities, such as the *Kodama*, Moro the Wolf god, the Forest Spirit, the Nightwalker and the Ape clan and various demons, such as the Boar god, turned demon,

Nago and Makoto- the ancient boar god, also turned demon, predating Nago. The majority of these encounters happen in conjunction with Ashitaka's presence in the scene. By including these meetings with the supernatural directly in view of Ashitaka, Hayao Miyazaki invites the audience to share Ashitaka's perspective and experience the awe-inspiring world of a supernatural nature, imbued with fantastic energy and life. While also immersing the viewer in the struggle and fight for survival, as Lady Eboshi and her Ironworkers seek to dominate the rest of the Ancient Forest. In doing so, Hayao Miyazaki utilises Ashitaka as a mediator between the human and other-than-human worlds.

The first encounter with the *Shishigami* of the forest presents a striking contrast to the loud, chaotic, and violent interactions that have dominated the narrative thus far. As a deity presiding over the Ancient Forest, the *Shishigami* embodies the essence of nature, representing both life and death. During the day, it appears as the 'forest spirit,' a "fantastic deerlike presence" (Napier 2005, p. 235) with "a surprisingly human countenance, albeit with unblinking red eyes" (Napier 2018, p. 192). While at night, it transforms (See Figures 62 and 63) into a towering "giant ectoplasmic [nightwalker]" (192). The moments in which Hayao Miyazaki reveals the *Shishigami* are deliberate points of narrative and thematic convergence which invite the audience to confront the film's vision of nature as a force that is simultaneously life-giving and destructive.

The first of these appearances occurs in a tranquil scene of reflection and healing, when Ashitaka, Yakul and two injured Iron Town workers enter the sanctuary of the "*Shishigami*'s Pond" (Cavallaro 2013, p. 122). Although Ashitaka's initial encounter with the supernatural begins with the boar god Nago, his subsequent experiences with the *Kodama* and the *Shishigami* gradually deepen his understanding of the sacred balance between life and death. By the film's final act, this balance reaches a point of rupture as Lady Eboshi "hopes to kill the *Shishigami* [...] and deliver its head to the Japanese emperor" (Napier 2018, p. 183). By achieving this feat, she can secure Iron Town's dominance over the forest and its resources. Yet, the deity's death unleashes devastating and deadly consequences for the natural environment and its inhabitants.

During the first encounter, Ashitaka saves two Iron town workers after Moro and her wolf cubs attack Lady Eboshi and her warriors on the cliffside of the mountains. Ashitaka and Yakul, along with the injured men, make their way through the mountains and into the immensity of the Ancient Forest, and soon encounter the *Kodama* (See Figure 64), which reside in healthy environments. Upon seeing these spirits, one of the injured workers panics and begs Ashitaka to leave the woodland, frightened by what these creatures are and what else could be lurking in the woods. Paying the frantic man no mind, yet gently reassuring him that he is safe, Ashitaka explains that the creatures are of no threat. The characters continue forward and come to a large, sheltered clearing with giant trees covered in a thicket of moss (See Figure 65). Within this space, Hayao Miyazaki portrays the Ancient Forest as “a magical environment” (Chan 2015, p. 101) in which the characters find themselves. Hayao Miyazaki highlights this “by [using] horizontal panning shots of verdant green land, clean water and butterflies” (101). However, the entire scene is also flooded with dark hues of green and blue. Although diffused sunlight filters down from the canopy above, the space is still inherently dim, which lends its hand to the sanctity of the place, conveying “feelings of veneration and “dark awe”” (Gossin 2015, p. 213). The darker colour palette gives the space a mystical quality, one of intrigue and even danger, as the injured workers warn Ashitaka that the Ancient Forest is “a place of gods and demons” (Miyazaki 1997).

The characters come to a stop at the water’s edge, where Ashitaka discovers the tracks of the Wolf family (See Figure 66) and realises, “this must be where they stay” (Miyazaki 1997), deep within the heart of the Ancient Forest. As he looks further into the stream, he notices a second, fresher set of prints (See Figure 67), ones unlike any animal he has seen before and remarks that “whatever made these [tracks], made these recently” (Miyazaki 1997). This moment not only signals the presence of San and her connection to the forest’s spirits but also foreshadows the encounters between the human and spiritual worlds that lie at the film’s core. On edge, Ashitaka begins to slowly take in the space, searching the expanse of forest. The camera pans slowly from left to right and comes to a stop in front of a mangrove of colossal trees (See Figure 68). The camera zooms in on a clearing between the tree trunks where a herd of deer are passing by. The once-dark forest now begins to lighten, almost glows in a golden light as a strange creature comes into view. This is revealed to be the *Shishigami* of the Ancient Forest (See Figures 68 and 69).

Enraptured by the scene in front of him, Ashitaka watches the deity in awe. A few moments pass, and Ashitaka suddenly groans in pain as his attention is brought back to his cursed arm. The limb bulges and moves beneath his clothing as he quickly plunges his arm into the stream, effectively ‘cooling’ off the rage and hate bubbling from within the curse. As the forest spirit moves out of frame, the golden light dissipates, and the forest returns to darkness and Ashitaka’s curse stops twisting on his skin. He then takes his stoneware, fills it with water from the stream, and offers it to the injured men, who, along with Ashitaka, are relieved of any pain and discomfort they would have been feeling from the curse and their injuries.

The colour gold, and specifically golden lighting, carries powerful symbolic weight in film, especially in animation. It is consistently linked to the manifestation of the divine, spiritual transcendence, and the successful completion of the hero’s quest which is called the apotheosis or ultimate boon. In cinema, the colour yellow is often associated with “luminosity [and] enlightenment” (Morton 1997, p. 32) which represents the mental clarity and spiritual feelings of veneration. Furthermore, the colour gold, or more specifically, the metal gold, “symboli[s]es immortality” (Campbell 1949, p. 139) as it does not corrode. Together, these luminous shades of yellow and gold convey what Joseph Campbell (1949, P. 32) calls “the mysterious creative energy of [a deity], which, in regard to this scene, is present when the Ancient Forest begins to glow in the *Shishigami*’s presence.

In regard to Ashitaka’s experience with the Forest Spirit, the golden lighting functions as a visual manifestation of the divine which in turn validates the spiritual reality of his quest and grants him a temporary ultimate boon of healing. This ‘boon’ aligns with Joseph Campbell’s ‘Hero’s Journey.’ However, it must be acknowledged that the Hero’s Journey framework is traditionally deeply anthropocentric, as it typically centres the human experience and frames the natural world as a secondary region of supernatural wonder through which the hero must pass to achieve personal mastery. However, Miyazaki subverts this convention by fundamentally shifting the quest’s objective. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), Ashitaka’s ‘ultimate boon’ is not individual glory or the conquest of a natural enemy, but the achievement of a relational ontology that allows for multispecies coexistence. By replacing the traditional goal of human ‘dominion’ with a commitment to staying with the trouble of an entangled

world, Miyazaki utilises the quest structure not to celebrate human exceptionalism, but to facilitate the decentring of the human figure within the mesh of life.

The fleeting presence of the golden radiance signals that Ashitaka has accessed the “causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside” (Campbell 1949, p. 33). This is a critical step in the hero’s journey. As the essence of the hero’s journey is that it is fundamentally “inward [and goes] into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world” (43). By encountering the *Shishigami* of the Ancient Forest, and by just being in its presence alone, Ashitaka momentarily achieves a state of “illumination” (255) as he comes to realise, he is in the awesome presence of a god. While in the *Shishigami*’s presence, He also experiences temporary “transfiguration [and] freedom [from pain]” (255), which manifests from the curse.

The moment the light breaks through the darkness of the Ancient Forest reinforces the mythological need for the hero to “break through to the undistorted, direct experience and assimilation of what C.G. Jung has called ‘the archetypal images’” (Campbell 1949, p. 33). Here, the archetypal image takes the form of the *Shishigami*, whose appearance, enveloped in the gilded light, eases the pain and discomfort of Ashitaka and the wounded men. The golden light breaking through the darkness serves not only as a striking visual element but also as a philosophical and spiritual threshold. Its sudden radiance signals a transition from the ordinary world into the sacred, affirming the presence of the *kami*, which are the spirit beings and natural forces that lie at the heart of *Shinto* cosmology. Melanie Chan (2015, pp. 97–98) highlights how *Shinto* spiritual traditions fundamentally reshape human perceptions of the natural world and its inherent value:

The meanings associated with spirit-beings and animism carry implications in terms of how the non-human realm is perceived and valued. According to *Shinto* cosmology, throughout the universe there are various kami or spirits that can take numerous forms such as animals, humans and even natural phenomena such as mountains or forests. The *Shinto* approach to kami is evident in rituals and in ecological views towards the natural world.

This Shinto-influenced recognition of the intrinsic value of the environment supports the dissertation’s adoption of Greg Garrard’s (2023) term of other-than-human to describe the Forest Spirit and the *Kodama*. As defined in the Introduction, utilising this specific terminology

is a deliberate strategy to avoid the hierarchical implications of the word “non-human,” which Garrard argues inherently “implies lack or failure”. By portraying the Ancient Forest as a realm populated by *kami*, Miyazaki rejects a worldview where nature is defined solely by what it is not (i.e., not human). Instead, he establishes the Forest Spirit as a sentient, agentic entity that exists independently of human utility.

Daniel Shaw (2005) highlights that *kami* is experienced spiritually as a presence that “inspires wonder or awe” (11). The shift in the dimly lit *Shishigami*’s Pond, from the varying shades of dark hues of moss green and caerulean to the glowing golden light, aligns with the sublime, which is defined by astonishment. This is portrayed through Ashitaka’s experience which compels him to watch the deity in awe. This in turn, confirms that the light, and more specifically, a golden or warm yellow light, is the spectacle through which the sacred is revealed. As Ashitaka stands in the golden light of the *Shishigami*’s presence, the filmic strategies of colour and light visually articulate a relational ontology. In this moment, the other-than-human world is revealed not as a passive backdrop or a resource to be mastered, but as a primary actor in the mesh of existence. Ashitaka’s awestruck reaction and his subsequent healing validate the sacred reality of these beings, suggesting that humanity and nature are “provisional fictions that are thoroughly interwoven” (Garrad 2023, p. 17) rather than distinct domains arranged in a hierarchy.

This scene not only marks Ashitaka’s first encounter with the *Shishigami* but also reveals Hayao Miyazaki’s construction of the forest as a sacred and living entity. The concealed area of “the forest’s inner sanctum” (Cavallaro 2013, p. 122), or the “*Shishigami*’s Pond,” (122) reflects a *Shinto* belief that secluded areas are “holy places” (122). Such holy places are often marked with the presence of “pure water [flowing] in the depth of the forest in the deep mountains” (Miyazaki 1997, Online). This “symbolise[s] the boundary beyond which humans should not enter” (Mumcu and Yilmaz 2018, p. 10). Although the presence of the wolf family’s tracks suggests that San, Moro’s human daughter, is an exception to the rule, her hybrid identity of being “part wolf and part human” (Hall 2015, p. 161) explains this distinction.

This dual nature allows San to bridge the spiritual realm of the *kami* and the human realm, which means that she “plays an intermediary role between the two worlds” (Hall 2016, p. 161). Hayao Miyazaki utilises San’s hybridity to convey an ideal relationship with the natural world, one that embodies an ecocentric vision of coexistence. While the film avoids traditional religious doctrine, Hayao Miyazaki employs animism “as a mentality that decentres humans in human-nature relations” (Toh 2021, p. 144). Thus, the mark San leaves on the forest floor signifies her role as a bridge between the spiritual and human worlds, embodying this animistic balance between humanity and nature.

San is a “young girl abandoned by her parents and raised by the wolf god Moro” (Semu and Mumcu 2018, p. 9). She “wholeheartedly believes that she [is a] wolf” (Bashveer 2023, p. 4295) and even “rejects the fact that she [is] a human” (4295). The other human characters, such as the Iron Town villagers, do not necessarily acknowledge San as human, as she is given the name ‘Princess Mononoke.’ This literally means “vengeful spirit-princess in Japanese” (van der Linden 2024, p. 237). The moniker signifies her status as an “untameable supernatural outsider haunting the boundaries” (Napier 2001, p. 178) between that of a beast and a human. Although Princess Mononoke is not considered a deity of the forest, she still possesses extraordinary “supernatural powers” (185) and skills which surpass human ability. She is a fierce warrior who can also “speak telepathically with Moro and the other beasts” (185). This characterisation allows San to be positioned as a “liminal figure” (186) within the narrative. The term liminal often denotes a “border or an edge” (Morton 2007, p. 74). This, in turn, indicates that she is closer to the animal and other *kami* characters” (186), which allows her to move freely in places forbidden to other humans.

San exemplifies an ecocritical perspective known as “multinaturalism” (Zhang 2024, p. 57), which acknowledges that nonhumans, including animals, plants, and spirits, possess a form of “personhood” (57). In this framework, the difference between humans and nonhumans does not erase the “kinship and layers of mutual dependence between different species” (57). This idea is portrayed through San’s survival in the forest as it is established on her acceptance of the biocentric view that the “flourishing of all the Earth’s creatures has its intrinsic value, independent of their usefulness for us” (57). Hayao Miyazaki also places San as “a guardian and punisher who represents nature” (Fadli 2022, p. 7). Throughout the narrative, San and other

forest-dwelling creatures protect the Ancient Forest from Lady Eboshi's greed and destruction. San is fiercely protective of the forest and makes the decision to kill Lady Eboshi if it means peace for the woodlands. Her fight mirrors real-world ecological struggles where humans are seen as "parasites feeding off the earth" (Bashveer 2023, p. 4295) and "reflects the battle of indigenous people who have been displaced, erased, or forced to fight for their lands against industrial expansion" (4295).

Hayao Miyazaki further reinforces this notion through Ashitaka's cultural history and race. As he is the last prince of the *Emishi* people who exist "in a fictional space and time, separate from any historical occurrence" (van der Linden 2024, p. 227). The *Emishi* people "were an ethnic group who lived in independent communities (*mura*) in the mountainous northern regions of Japan's main island of Honshu" (van der Linden 2024, p. 228). In the narrative, the *Emishi* people are seen as "the guardians of ancient wisdoms of the forest" (Bigelow 2009, p. 64). However, historically, the *Emishi* were a marginalised group of people under a "military and colonial subjugation mission" (van der Linden 2024, p. 228) by the Yamato court in the eighth century. Hayao Miyazaki's depiction of the *Emishi* people as "an ideal community where people lived in peace, following traditions that respected both humans and nature" (Bashveer 2023, p. 4296) also links to the narrative's conflict as Hayao Miyazaki artistically portrays them and the Ancient Forest as symbols of resistance for communities that maintain a sustainable relationship with the land.

Ashitaka's casual interaction with the *Kodama* further reinforces his connection and understanding of the natural world. He does not fear these doll-like creatures or entering the Ancient Forest but rather notes that "they have *Kodama*'s here too" (Miyazaki, 1997) and that they "will be just fine" (Miyazaki, 1997) once entering the forest. It is Ashitaka's presence in the *Shishigami*'s sanctuary that places him as a "bridge between humans and nature" (Basheer 2023, p. 4296). This link plays a vital role in how Hayao Miyazaki conveys an ideal concept of the human-nature relationship and coexistence with the natural world. Hayao Miyazaki utilises Ashitaka to embody this connection as Ashitaka can be seen as one of the few human characters who are "attuned to *Shinto* beliefs about *kami* and the spiritual dimension of the landscape" (Chan 2015, p. 101). He is able to "reassure the men that the *Kodama* are tree-dwelling spirits that bring good luck and symbolise the health and vitality of the forest" (Chan

2015, p. 101). This moment shows him actively educating the anthropocentric characters and attempting to teach them a “different perspective, one of empathy and compassion for beings that [are not] human” (Bashveer 2023, p. 4296). His knowledge stems from a perspective rooted in ecological *Shinto*, which promotes the understanding of nature as holy and sentient, demanding of respect.

Ashitaka’s intimate knowledge of the *Kodama* and his instant recognition of them being “tree-dwelling spirits” (Chan 2015, p. 101) demonstrates a part of his quest to “see with eyes unclouded by hate” (Miyazaki, 1997). In doing so, Ashitaka embodies what Susan J. Bigelow (2009, p. 63) calls a state of ‘pure mindedness’ where “one must have a pure (Makoto 誠) heart/mind (Kokoro 心),” in order to encounter the deities of the natural world. Ashitaka’s calm demeanour and relaxed interaction with the *Kodama*, “effectively distinguishes [him from] those characters whose spirits are open to the natural divinity of the place and those who superstitiously fear it” (Gossin 2015, p. 213, 214). This interaction also aligns with Ashitaka’s overall view of nature and humanity coexisting. Once in Iron Town, he pleads with Lady Eboshi and her Iron Workers to stop their exploits in the Ancient Forest and to instead find a way of peace and co-survival with the woodland animals and gods.

On the other hand, Ashitaka also meets with San and Moro and tries to mediate the conflict from the perspective of the forest and its creatures. Hayao Miyazaki’s use of Ashitaka as the mediator is crucial to the film’s environmental logic, which actively resists the impulse to “impose borders over balance” (Lerberg and Lerberg 2018, p. 58). This refers to how the film actively creates a disruption of an anthropocentric world that insists on keeping the human and natural environment separate. Instead, it reconfigures this anthropocentric narrative whereby, according to Hayao Miyazaki’s eco-philosophy, “humans are of nature and not external to it” (Toh 2021, p. 141). Ashitaka’s refusal to choose sides between the Ancient Forest and the Iron Town settlement highlights the “futility of demarcating borders between industrial [and the] pastoral” (Lerberg and Lerberg 2018, p. 58). Which in turn is the rigid binary of human and other-than-human worlds. However, this also includes the ineffectiveness of separating “culture [and] nature, spirituality [,] physicality and even good [versus] evil” (58), which are all intertwined. Therefore, Ashitaka’s neutrality becomes a factor which attempts to prevent a

“reductive dichotomy of nature versus humanity” (Cheng 2019, p. 37), as he finds himself “caught between two opposing forces, not fully belonging to either side but striving to bring them together and find balance” (Bashveer 2023, p. 4295).

This mediating role also places Ashitaka in a precarious position as he aims to convince both parties to “look beyond their rage and see that violence is a cycle that will only continue unless broken” (Bashveer 2023, p. 4296). He attempts to achieve this through direct dialogue with the nonhuman world, pleading with Moro, the wolf god, and asking her if there is “any way that the forest and humans can coexist without conflicts? Is it really true that there is no other way?” (Miyazaki, 1997). This question “poignantly reflects the conflict and dilemma between humans and nature” (Cheng 2019, p. 32) and highlights the ambiguous nature of coexistence between humanity and the natural world. Moro’s reaction is one of despair as she tells Ashitaka that he and other humans cannot understand the gravity of the destruction being inflicted upon the nonhuman world. She emphasises this lack of understanding by noting that Ashitaka, “and by extension other humans, cannot hear the dying cries of the trees as they are cut down” (Zhang 2024, p. 66). Moro’s lament highlights a fundamental “epistemological limit” (55) of humanity, as the film suggests that “[e]mbodiment affects what forms of communication can be transmitted” (66), meaning Ashitaka, as a human, is not attuned to the forest in the ways Moro is. This ‘lack of understanding’ is also extended to the audience, as Miyazaki does not allow the audience to hear any sounds from the forest, other than ambient noises. Ambient sound is “the appropriate sounds of daily life that accompany the image, whether the scene is set inside or outside” (Sikov 2020, p. 215). In this regard, Miyazaki aligns the audience with the human characters, holding a mirror up to the viewer and prompting them to reconsider their understanding of the natural world.

Ashitaka’s objectivity to the conflict also aligns with *Shinto* philosophy, as the religion, and by extension its practitioners and believers, reject any and all forms of dualism, by asserting that there must be “no separation between body and mind, spirit and matter” (Bigelow 2009, p. 31). This entails that the environment and humanity are “both parts of a fundamental oneness” (Kunadu 2021, p. 129). As a result, Ashitaka’s journey to find the source of the iron-musket ball then exemplifies the complex truth that all of these concepts of the physical, spiritual and nature, are indeed interwoven. First, Ashitaka must address the physical reality of the war

between the creatures of the Ancient Forest and the humans who inhabit Iron Town. He must then acknowledge his curse and endure the spiritual demand to overcome the hatred he ends up feeling toward Lady Eboshi and Iron Town, and follow the old village woman's instructions to see with "eyes unclouded by hate" (Miyazaki 1997). All the while, Ashitaka embodies the moral imperative to find a path of healing and reconciliation for both the industrialized community and the natural world.

However, Hayao Miyazaki uses Ashitaka's curse as the ultimate tragic link because it is a hybrid of all conflicts. It originated from the iron ball which represents human technology and industrial expansion, that wedged itself in the boar god Nago. The curse itself is "sentient and feeds on the anger, hatred, and frustration" (Bashveer 2023, p. 4296) which are the emotional and spiritual dimensions. Susan Napier (2018, p. 188) notes that the curse fuses "human technology embedded within [... a] supernatural beast" (188), therefore symbolising "humanity's cruelty and desire to bend nature to its will (van der Linden 2024, p. 238). This links back to its cause which is the "very ambition that drove Lady Eboshi to shoot the boar god [in the first place] (238). This section provided an analysis which has explored Ashitaka's function as a mediator between the human and other-than-human world. It details how his pivotal encounter with the *Shishigami*, which is marked by the presence of golden light, validates the sacred reality of his journey and grants him a temporary state of healing. This next section provides an overview of Chapter Two as a whole.

The preceding analysis of the early sequences in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) comprehensively demonstrates Hayao Miyazaki's multifaceted exploration of the severe friction between a formidable, ancient natural world and humanity's increasingly destructive path. The opening sequence instantly establishes a liminal, mythic space populated by powerful, ethereal beings such as talking wolves, boars, and apes. This wondrous landscape, however, is quickly revealed to be a contested territory and a site of resistance against the obliteration wrought by humankind, set specifically in a medieval or Muromachi timeline where human greed has started to degrade both Japan's physical and spiritual environments.

Miyazaki masterfully uses limited visibility, dense foliage, and dark hues to evoke the ‘uncanny’ nature of the forest, a sense of the unusual and something potentially menacing that lurks just beyond the frame. This environment serves as the stage for the introduction of the corrupted boar god Nago, transformed into a terrifying, writhing mass. This portrayal of the infected boar as decidedly ‘other’ challenges anthropocentrism, the paradigm that prioritizes human values and needs over the entire ecosystem. By depicting the strangeness of the nonhuman, the narrative compels the audience to acknowledge their deep-seated intimacy and interdependence with the natural world.

Crucially, the conflict is not external but fundamentally interwoven, as articulated by the ecocritical concept of the mesh, where boundaries between life-forms are described as “wide and permeable” (Morton 2011, p. 22). This ecological entanglement is visualized through the iron bullet, a symbol of human technology, becoming physically inseparable from Nago’s body, thus dissolving the sharp distinction between the animate and the inanimate. Moreover, the violence enacted by humanity against nature is shown to recoil through the mesh, infecting human life itself, as evidenced when Nago’s curse brands itself onto Ashitaka’s arm. This reflects the ancient Japanese belief that aggression toward the forest results in retribution from the forest deity, transforming the curse into a physical and symbolic embodiment of moral ecological consequence. The violent decomposition of Nago and the decay of the surrounding land represents a sudden ‘regime shift,’ a catastrophic ecological tipping point where the ecosystem rapidly transitions to a ‘less desirable’ condition, losing its capacity to sustain resources and absorb further disturbance.

Against this backdrop of destruction, Ashitaka emerges as a vital mediator. As the last prince of the *Emishi* people who are historically portrayed as guardians of ancient wisdom and an idealised, peaceful community, Ashitaka embodies a philosophy that respects both humanity and nature. His calm interaction with the benevolent tree spirits, the *Kodama*, showcases his ‘pure-mindedness’ and spiritual alignment with *Shinto* concepts, which regard the landscape as holy and sentient. This open-minded perspective contrasts sharply with the fearful reactions of anthropocentric characters. Ashitaka’s pivotal encounter with the *Shishigami* in its secluded sanctuary provides a momentary resolution. The emergence of the deity, bathed in golden light, functions as a visual manifestation of the divine, validating Ashitaka’s difficult spiritual

journey and providing him with a temporary state of healing, or *ultimate boon*, by alleviating the pain of his curse. This moment signifies a breaking through to the sacred, affirming the existence of the *kami*, or spirit beings, at the core of *Shinto* cosmology.

Furthermore, the character of San, the human girl raised by the wolf god Moro, reinforces the possibility of coexistence. Her hybrid, liminal identity allows her to act as an intermediary, embodying an ecocentric viewpoint that acknowledges the “personhood” of nonhumans, which is a concept known as multinaturalism. Both San and Ashitaka’s roles are crucial in resisting the impulse to impose rigid binaries, such as industrial versus the pastoral, human versus nature and culture versus. Nature. Ashitaka’s refusal to align himself fully with either the Ancient Forest or Iron Town is rooted in *Shinto* philosophy’s rejection of dualism, asserting instead that humanity and the environment are both one in the same, and should not be viewed as separate from each other.

Ultimately, while Ashitaka attempts reconciliation through dialogue, meeting with Lady Eboshi and then Morr, his journey is tragically complicated by the curse itself, which remains as a hybrid link fusing human technological aggression, which is the iron musket ball, with spiritual hatred and frustration. The film ends by proposing the philosophical question to the audience, through Ashitaka’s plea to Moro, about the viability of coexistence. Simultaneously, the film also highlights humanity’s inherent ‘epistemological limit’ in truly understanding the depth of nature’s suffering. As this section summarised the main points from Chapter Two, the following section provides the final conclusion for the entire dissertation.

4. Conclusion

This conclusion integrates the main findings and critical insights drawn from the ecocritical analysis of Hayao Miyazaki’s animated films, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and reflects on the broader theoretical and practical implications of his cinematic vision. This dissertation thoroughly explored the ecocritical dimensions and visual storytelling in the two selected films, contextualising Miyazaki’s oeuvre within a global

environmental discourse and Japanese visual culture. By framing these films, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), as critical dystopias, the study has identified how Miyazaki moves beyond totalising despair to offer glimmers of hope and the possibility of transformation (Sargent 2022) amidst ecological collapse. The dissertation established that Hayao Miyazaki fundamentally challenges the western-centric paradigm by advocating for a relational ontology where humans and nature are interdependent, rather than hierarchically ordered.

In Chapter one, the analysis of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) establishes a coherent ecological arc that transitions from apocalyptic environmental devastation, which results from the ecocide of the Ceramic Wars and the apocalyptic ‘Seven Days of Fire’, to a final stage of concealed planetary renewal. Chapter one discussed and analysed three key scenes, ‘The Decimated Village’, ‘Nausicaä’s Underground Garden’ and ‘A New World’. The narrative arc of the film pivots on the knowledge acquired by Nausicaä, the protagonist who serves as an agent of renewal and redemption. Driven by compassion and scientific expertise, Nausicaä rejects the militaristic solution of destroying the *Fukai* and rather opts to learn from the Toxic Jungle and understand the plant life within the fungi forest.

This quest for knowledge is exemplified in her subterranean garden, which also functions as a laboratory. Here, she discovers the crucial truth about the Sea of Decay and its ecological function in her post-apocalyptic world. She comes to find that the *Fukai* is not intrinsically malicious, but an autonomous purifying force, working to cleanse the Earth of pollution. She proves that the plants’ toxicity only stems from growing in the heavily contaminated environment created by humanity’s past destruction. The underground laboratory itself is rendered with luminous, warm hues, symbolising an ideal harmonious relationship and mutual dependence between humanity and nature, while simultaneously minimising Nausicaä’s presence compared to the massive flora, reinforcing nature’s immense scale.

The study situated these environmental crises within the Anthropocene, the geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant influence on the Earth’s ecosystems. By interpreting the discovery of the ‘New World,’ the dissertation argued that Miyazaki’s vision

provides a culturally grounded alternative to the despair of the Anthropocene. Through extreme spatial composition, humanity is intentionally diminished, reinforcing nature's autonomous capacity for what scholars describe as the "re-worlding of the Anthropocene" (Rust, Monani, and Cubitt 2023, p. 111) a restorative process that operates independently of human control. In this scene, Miyazaki uses a minimalistic palette of cool, light blue tones, soft whites, and silver highlights to signify truth, purity, honesty, and renewal. Nausicaä and Asbel come to the realisation that the environmental restoration of their planet is achieved autonomously by the colossal crystalline trees situated beneath the Sea of Decay.

Structurally and ecologically, these magnificent trees are reminiscent of Giant Sequoia Redwoods, a species noted for its extraordinary vitality and resistance to decay-producing fungi. These towering trees act as resilient vessels of life as they absorb moisture from the toxic environment above, filter clean water through their petrified trunks, and regulate the underground ecosystem. Through this process, the trees evolved to purify the earth of all the pollution that humans have made, creating clean streams and unpolluted air within the subterranean space. This profound physical cleansing process, which operates silently and independent of human control, aligns conceptually with *Shinto* principles of purification and cleansing. Through spatial composition, particularly low-angle and high-angle shots, humanity is intentionally spatially diminished and decentred, reinforcing the concept of nature's autonomous capacity for the "re-worlding of the Anthropocene" (Rust, Monani, and Cubitt 2023, p. 111).

Chapter One demonstrated that the Toxic Jungle is an autonomous purifying force. The decimated landscapes of the Sea of Decay serve as a primary example of "life in capitalist ruins" (Tsing 2015, p. 1). The analysis showed that the fungal overgrowth is not merely decay, but an eruption of unexpected liveliness and "collaborative survival" (2) that re-orders the world in the wake of human industrial failure. The narrative arc pivots on Nausicaä, whose refusal to destroy the forest in favour of scientific inquiry represents a commitment to "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016, p. 1). Rather than seeking a human-centric 'cure,' she accepts the entanglements of earthly living to foster a "multispecies justice" (3) that allows for ongoingness on a damaged planet.

Chapter Two, focusing on *Princess Mononoke*, utilised Timothy Morton's (2012) concept of the mesh to foreground the reality of ecological entanglement. This was most vividly dramatized in the corruption of the boar god Nago, whose body became a literal fusion of organic flesh and a human-made iron musket ball. By adopting Morton's lens, the study argues that the boundaries between living and non-living forms are "wide and permeable" (Morton 2011, p. 22), demonstrating that violence directed toward nature inevitably circulates through the mesh to infect human life. Furthermore, the dissertation adopted Greg Garrard's (2023) term, other-than-human, to move beyond hierarchical western models that view nature solely as a resource. The analysis identified Ashitaka and San as critical mediators and "bridges" between the human and other-than-human worlds. This framework was vital for acknowledging that spirits like the *Kodama* and the Forest Spirit are not secondary categories of life, but active, agentic forces that possess their own personhood and wild nature.

The first scene analysed in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), refers to reciprocal destruction, which is visually dramatised through the fate of the boar god Nago, who is shot with an iron musket ball and transformed into a grotesque demon or *tatarigami*. Once transformed, he is therefore corrupted and driven mad by vengeance as he rampages through the forest and into Ashitaka's village. This fusion of a human-made object, which is the bullet, with the creature's organic flesh, strikingly confirms Timothy Morton's ecocritical concept of the mesh, which demonstrates that the boundaries between living and non-living forms are neither rigid nor well defined and are instead easily merged. This corruption, which subsequently infects Ashitaka's arm, serves as a literal and symbolic embodiment of ecological retribution and the moral consequences of human aggression against the environment. Nago's instantaneous death and subsequent decomposition represent a catastrophic regime shift, signalling the ecosystem's failure to absorb the extreme ecological destruction caused by humanity and retain its stability.

Ultimately, the film moves toward a resolution based on the moral imperative of coexistence and sustainability. This necessity is embodied by the liminal figures of Ashitaka and San, who function as critical mediators and 'bridges' between the human and other-than-human worlds. Ashitaka, the last prince of the *Emishi*, embodies a state of 'pure-mindedness,' allowing him to interact calmly with spirits like the *Kodama*, and actively attempts to translate his knowledge and teach empathy to the other human characters who show a lack of understanding for the

natural environment. Ashitaka also refuses to choose sides in the conflict and looks to both sides of the Ancient Forest and Iron Town to co-exist peacefully. However, co-existence is not on the agenda for either side.

Chapter Two also discusses the golden light breaking through the darkness of the Ancient Forest, which serves as a philosophical and spiritual threshold. It therefore signals a transition from the ordinary into the sacred. In doing so, this golden light affirms the presence of the *kami* that lie at the heart of *Shinto* cosmology. This pivotal scene underscores Ashitaka's role as a bridge between humans and nature, distinguishing him from other characters whose anthropocentric fears prevent them from experiencing the environment's natural divinity. San, raised by the wolf god Moro, is positioned as a fierce warrior representing 'wild nature' and multinaturalism, which is the acknowledgment that nonhumans possess a sense of personhood, which in turn, symbolises resistance against environmental degradation.

In summary, Chapter Two explored a complex human and other-than-human relationship which develops from intractable conflict, rooted in the tension between human industrial expansion and sacred nature, while discussing the implications of humanity's action on the natural world. This chapter focused on two key scenes from *Princess Mononoke* (1997), 'The Boar God's Demon Curse' and 'Ashitaka Encounters The Forest Spirit and *Kodama*'. These scenes effectively explored the seemingly intractable conflict between human industrial expansion and the natural world, actively challenging anthropocentric perspectives. This narrative foregrounds the crucial concept of ecological entanglement, which vividly illustrates how violence inflicted upon the environment inevitably recoils upon humanity itself. Miyazaki challenges anthropocentric perspectives by emphasising that humanity and nature should not be understood as distinct domains arranged in a hierarchy, but rather as intertwined systems whose interactions shape the world in equal and reciprocal ways.

Hayao Miyazaki's cinema functions as an artistic articulation of an animist, anti-hierarchical worldview that positions nature as sacred, sentient, and deserving of respect. By drawing on *Shinto* imagery and Japanese cultural beliefs, Miyazaki presents an ecological imaginary that offers a culturally grounded alternative to western models that often reinforce human dominion

over nature. Miyazaki utilizes his mastery of visual aesthetics and cinematic techniques, such as colour symbolism, *mise-en-scène*, and sophisticated spatial composition, not merely for aesthetic effect, but to directly convey deep symbolic meanings and foster an empathic connection between the viewer and the natural world depicted. For example, the visual juxtaposition in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) of the lush ancient forest against the pollution emitted by Iron Town visually reinforces the film's core tension between environmental harmony and industrial progress.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), function as ecological warnings, cautionary tales, and ecological fables. In doing so, these films carry significant practical implications for environmental advocacy. By compelling audiences to reflect on their own practices and responsibilities toward the natural world, Miyazaki demonstrates how animated media can be repurposed by the filmmaker to communicate critical understandings of contemporary environmental collapse. This dissertation, by examining the widely praised English adaptations, sustains that Miyazaki's intricate ecological vision resonates globally, inspiring critical reflection on ecological stewardship across cultural boundaries.

This dissertation focused primarily on the visual and thematic elements accessible through the English-language translations of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). While the visual storytelling remains unchanged, future research could explore and therefore potentially benefit from the nuances of environmental concepts and verbal expressions of the human and other-than-human relationships in the Japanese version of the films. As a result, these future research findings could deepen the understanding of linguistic and cultural influences which are contained within the original Japanese texts.

Furthermore, future ecocritical inquiry could expand upon this foundation by investigating how Miyazaki's critiques of the modern, anarchic *anime* industry inform his preference for meticulous realism and complex, morally ambiguous narratives. Directions for future research could also include integrating analyses of Miyazaki's consistently strong feminist protagonists, like Nausicaä and San, with their ecological roles and how these heroines and other female

characters like Kushana and Lady Eboshi, are ‘dark mirrors’ of each other. With Nausicaä renowned for her pacifism and compassion, and advocacy for coexistence between humanity and the Natural environment, while San is known for her ruthlessness and hate, unwilling to be part of the human world in any way, shape, or form. Future research could also benefit from conducting comparative studies by examining the influence of traditional Japanese artforms, such as *Kabuki* or woodblock prints, on the visual language of Miyazaki’s ecocritical landscapes.

Ultimately, the power of Hayao Miyazaki’s storytelling lies in his uncompromising presentation of a world where human virtues and flaws are inextricably intertwined with the fate of the natural environment. He invites the audience to confront the moral imperative of coexistence, showing that survival relies not on conquering nature, but on learning from its independent tempo and purpose. By utilizing animation to address urgent environmental crises, Miyazaki inspires scholars and the public alike to recognise the vital role of art, especially that of animation, in shaping our environmental consciousness and spurring positive action.

In conclusion, this dissertation presented a comprehensive ecocritical analysis of Hayao Miyazaki’s animated films, with a specific focus on *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The dissertation employed a theoretical framework that combined ecocriticism, environmental hermeneutics with the concept of the mesh (Morton 2012), the other-than-human (Garrard 2023), and the critical dystopia (Sargent 2022). By integrating the perspectives of *Staying with the trouble* (Haraway 2016) and *living life in capitalist ruins* (Tsing 2015), the research challenged anthropocentric worldviews and established that Miyazaki advocates for a relational ontology where survival relies not on conquering nature, but on learning from its independent tempo and purpose. In doing so, this dissertation analysed the intricate, interdependent relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Multiple key sections examine Miyazaki’s biography, including his influences such as aviation and childhood guilt over the war, as well as the themes of ecological collapse, industrial expansion, and the potential for planetary renewal in his films. This dissertation’s analysis

emphasises how Miyazaki employs sophisticated visual storytelling techniques, including colour symbolism, *mise-en-scène*, and spatial composition, to challenge anthropocentric worldviews and advocate for a necessary coexistence with the natural world.

Appendix

Introduction



Figure 1: The God Warriors, bioweapons created by humanity during the Ceramic Wars. They have destroyed a city; the intense heat from their nuclear blasts melts the city's infrastructure.



Figure 2: The God Warriors marching through the burning remnants of a city.



Figure 3: A medium shot of the Toxic Jungle from the outside. The fungal webbing resembles giant spider webs, while the grey-green hues suggest it is a site of toxicity. Both of which make this place feel like a space of danger.



Figure 4: Inside the Toxic Jungle, the atmosphere is almost serene, softened by the gentle glow from the bioluminescent fungi, which makes the space appear less threatening, despite its darker hues.

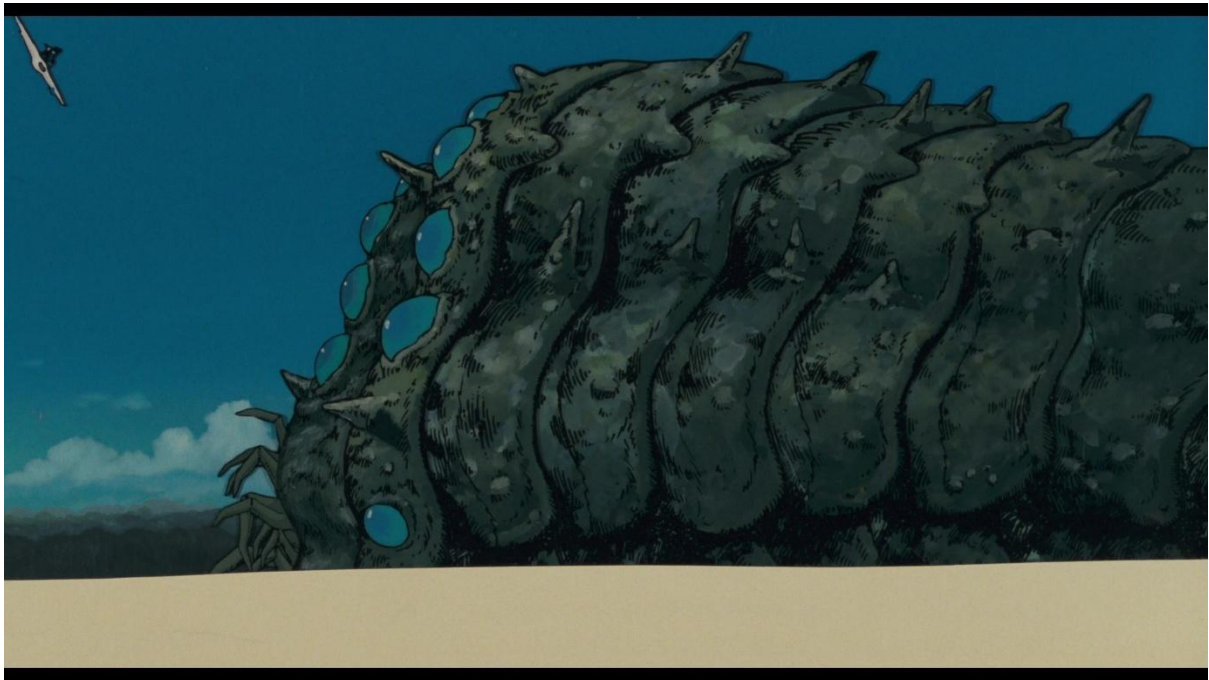


Figure 5: A giant insect, known as an Ohmu, is a protector of the Sea of Decay. Nausicaä is depicted on her glider at the top left of the image, underscoring the creature's magnitude in comparison to human characters in the film.

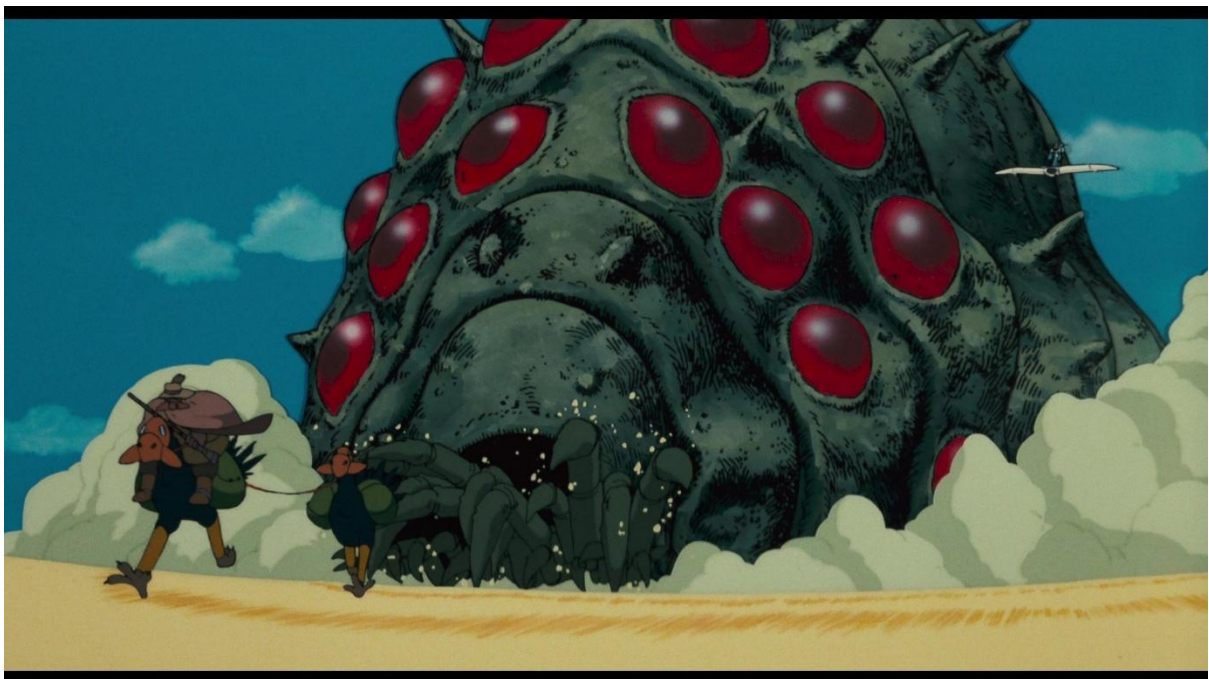


Figure 6: Ohmu are extremely protective of their habitat and will aim to kill anyone or anything that threatens them. Here, an Ohmu charges at Lord Yupa after his exploration of a decimated village somewhere near the Fukai. When angry, the eyes of an Ohmu turn red.

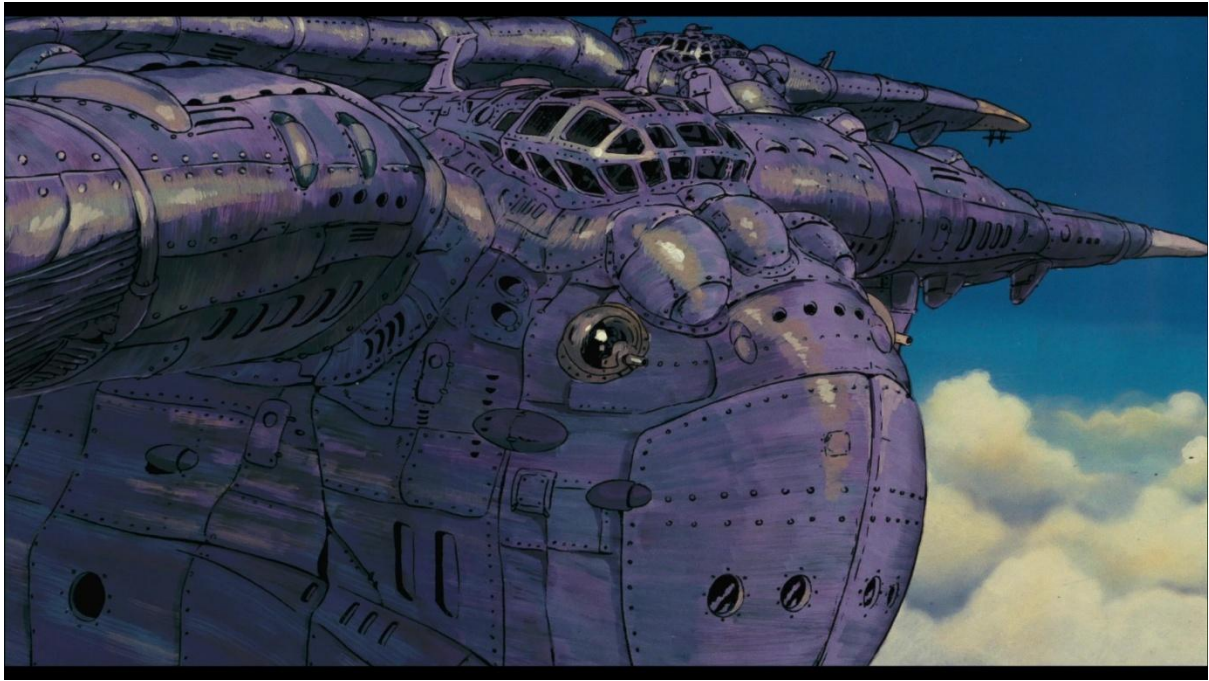


Figure 7: A Torumekian (or Tolmekian) airship carrying the God Warrior which was discovered in the city of Pejite.



Figure 8: The villagers of the Valley of the Wind find a toxic spore in their vineyard, prompting decisive and destructive actions to destroy it before it spreads.



Figure 9: The secret entrance to Nausicaä's underground garden.



Figure 10: A master shot of Nausicaä's underground garden, bursting with plant life she sampled from the Toxic Jungle. Here, the plants glow in an array of soft, warm colours, creating an inviting space.



Figure 11: The curse wrapped around Ashitaka's arm, burning its way through his clothing and into his skin.



Figure 12: The Boar god, Nago, is infected and therefore cursed by humanity's greed and aggression when he is shot with a weapon of Iron Town's making. The curse manifests itself as grotesque, leech-like creatures that ultimately consume Nago and kill him.



Figure 13: The Shishigami of the Ancient Forest, which manifests itself as the 'Forest Spirit' during the day. It is deer-like in appearance, with a somewhat human face that resembles a mask covering the spirit's head.



Figure 14: A birds-eye view of Lady Eboshi's secret garden, walled off from the rest of Iron Town. Her garden is the entrance to a small workshop where she cares for the lepers.



Figure 15: The lepers Lady Eboshi has under her care, resting in a safe space she has created for them.



Figure 16: Other workers with leprosy work on creating hand-held rifles for Lady Eboshi. She needs these rifles to fight of the creatures of the Ancient Forest, but also for the women of Iron Town so they have their own means of protection.



Figure 17: Ashitaka, after being shot by one of the Iron workers for intervening between the fight happening between Lady Eboshi and San, still manages to pick San up over his shoulders and carry her away from the gathering crowd. He makes his way to the gates of the town.



Figure 18: Ashitaka is stopped by the Ironworkers from leaving the town, as they still plan on killing San in order to continue mining iron ore. Ashitaka ignores their demands, pushes them aside and leaves Iron Town with San slung over his shoulders.



Figure 19: Lady Eboshi has beheaded the Forest Spirit mid-transformation into the Night Walker, suggesting that, despite being a deity, the Forest Spirit, at some point, is vulnerable. A black substance then oozes from its gaping wound.

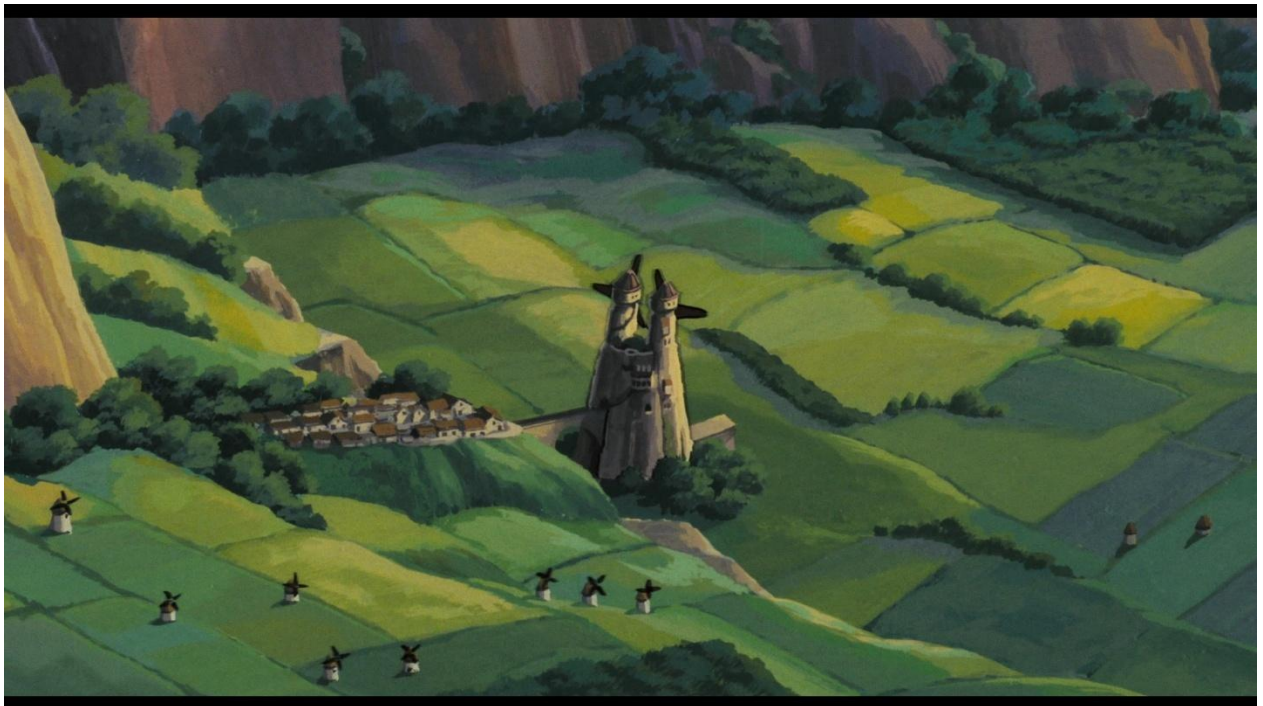


Figure 20: The windmills of the Valley of the Wind provide a source of renewable energy to its inhabitants.



Figure 21: The curse branded into Ashitaka's right arm. Here, Ashitaka examines an iron musket ball, which he found to be the cause of the boar god's curse in the first place.

Chapter One

The Decimated Village



Figure 22: The opening scene of Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984). There is a thick layer of dust or pollution in the air, making visibility extremely difficult. This scene sets the tone and expectations of what the Toxic Jungle is capable of.



Figure 23; Lord Yupa riding on a 'horse-claw'. All three subjects in the frame wear protective gear.



Figure 24: The landscape is covered in a thick web-like layer of fungal growth.



Figure 25: A deteriorated windmill covered in fungiform.



Figure 26: The Toxic Jungle has consumed this village. Every structure and surface in sight has been contaminated by the deadly spores.



Figure 27: A clear view of Lord Yupa's brown cape which shares the same sepia colour palette as the village he has come to investigate.



Figure 28: Lord Yupa carries with him a hand-held weapon of some kind.



Figure 29: Lord Yupa kicks down a door to a decimated home, exposing a dark interior with no signs of human life. There is an overgrowth of fungi that nearly obscures the entire frame in this sequence.

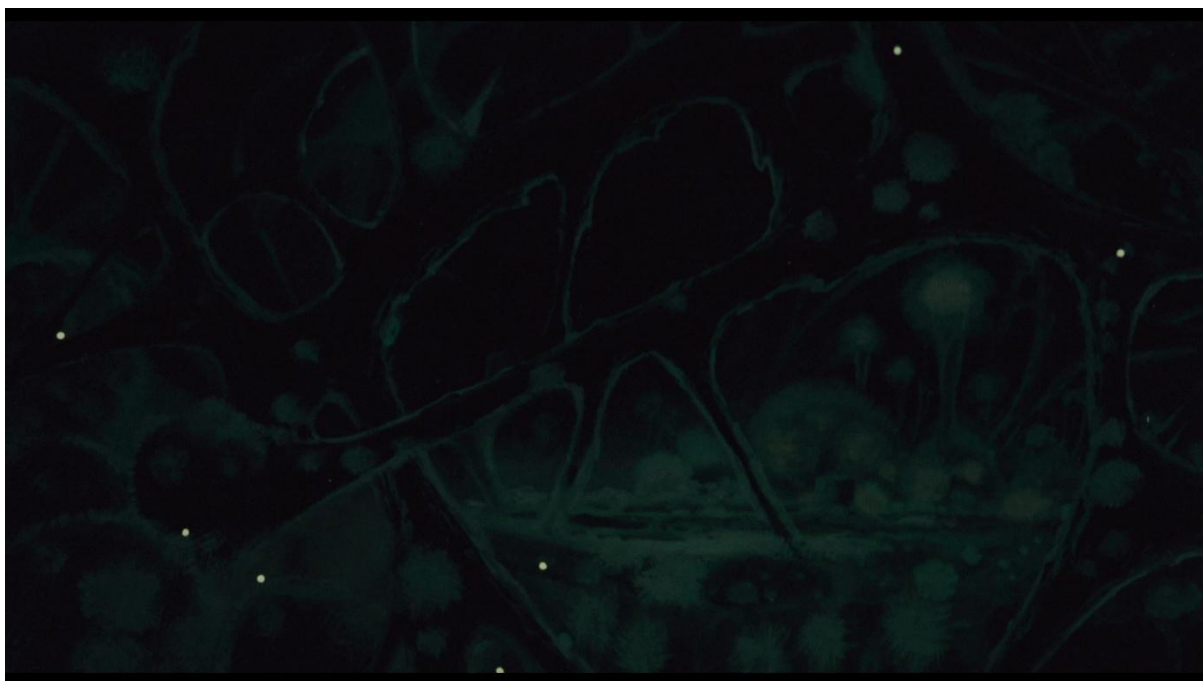


Figure 30: The dark interior, compared to the brighter outside world. Here, organic matter takes up most of the space rendering it unidentifiable.



Figure 31: Lord Yupa hovers at the threshold of a destroyed home where a small child's doll lies at his feet.



Figure 32: As Lord Yupa picks up the doll, it turns to dust. This is also symbolic of humanity's touch (actions), which destroyed the environment, directly affecting humanity as well.

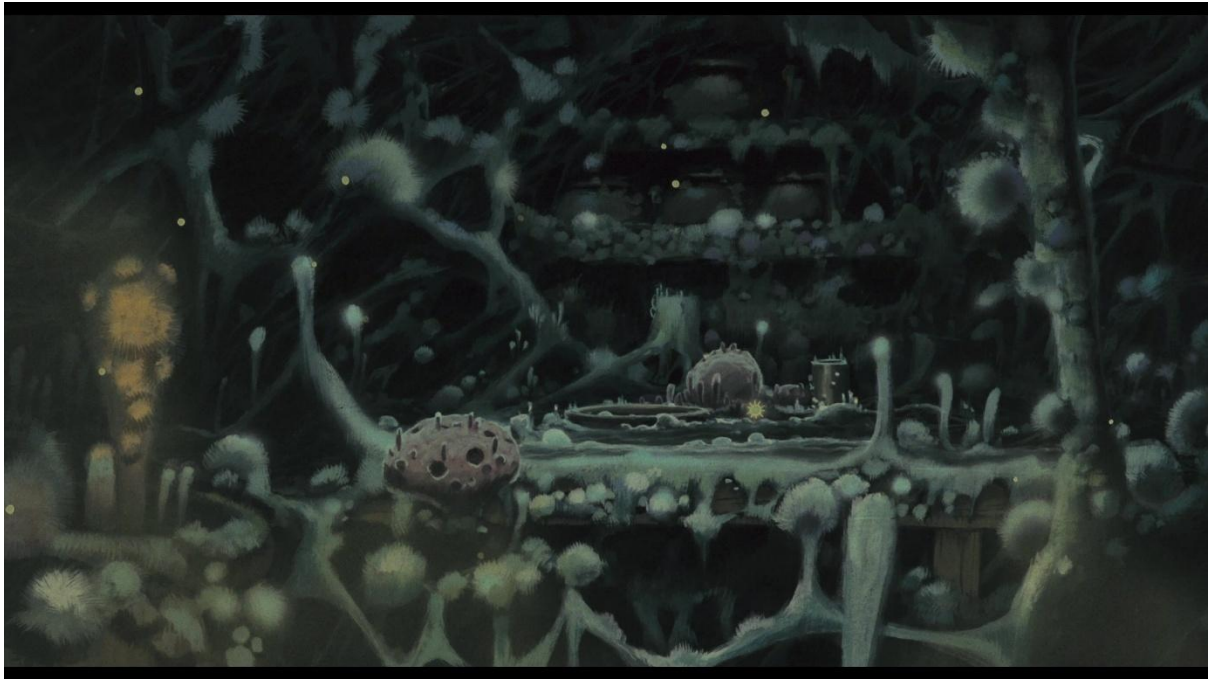


Figure 33: The fungi have completely consumed the interior of this house. This object in frame appears to be a table of some sort, but the growth covering the object makes it difficult to identify.

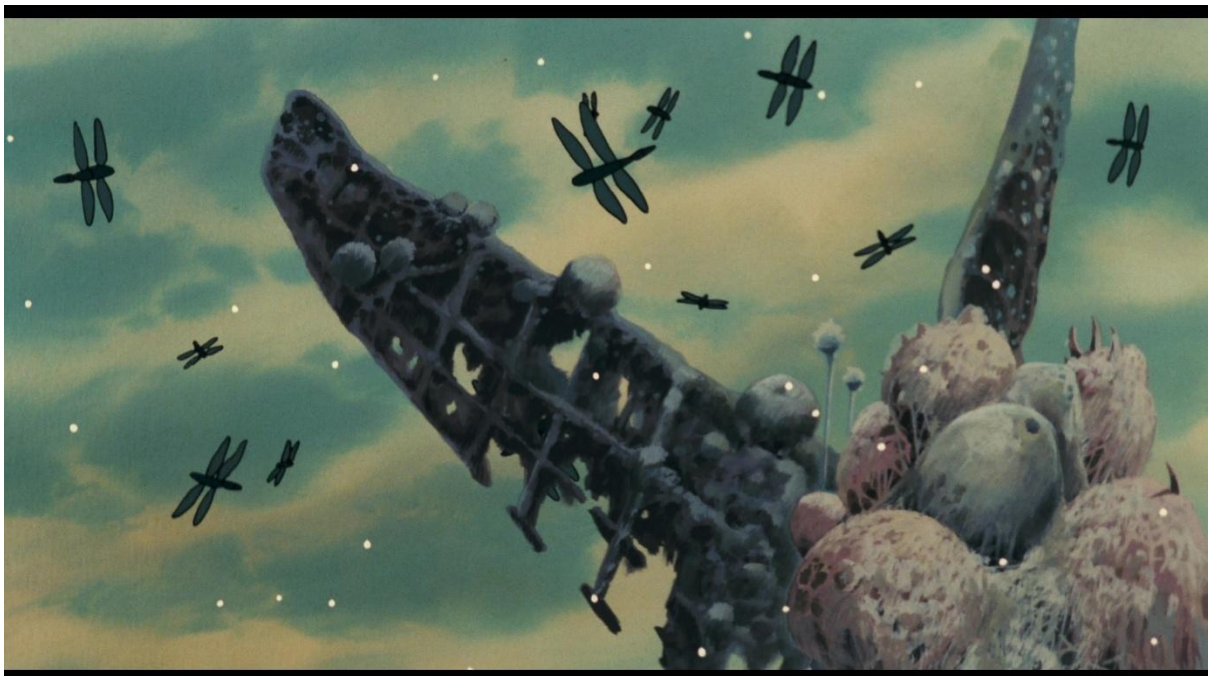


Figure 34: Giant insects circle the airspace above the decimated village. The gargantuan size of their silhouettes compared to the windmill reinforces the immensity of the creatures of the Sea of Decay, and by extension, the immensity of nature.

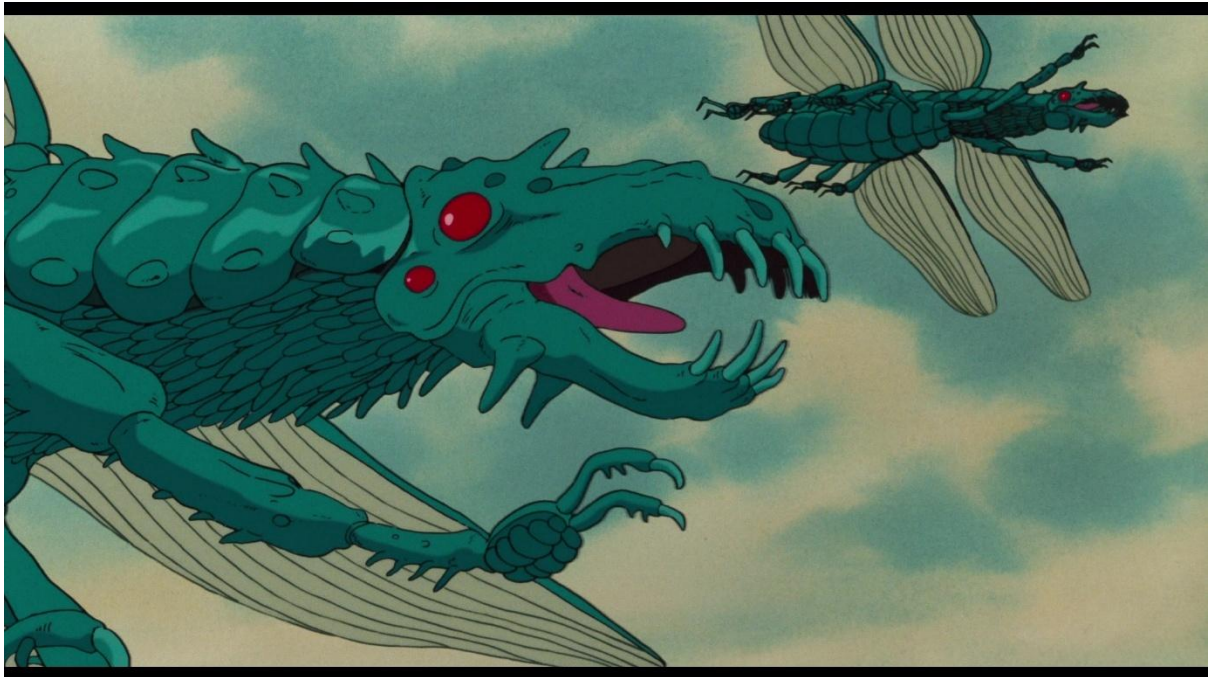


Figure 35: A grotesque image of a dragonfly creature from the Toxic Jungle. Its blue colouring is reminiscent of the plant life within its depths.

Nausicaä's Underground Garden

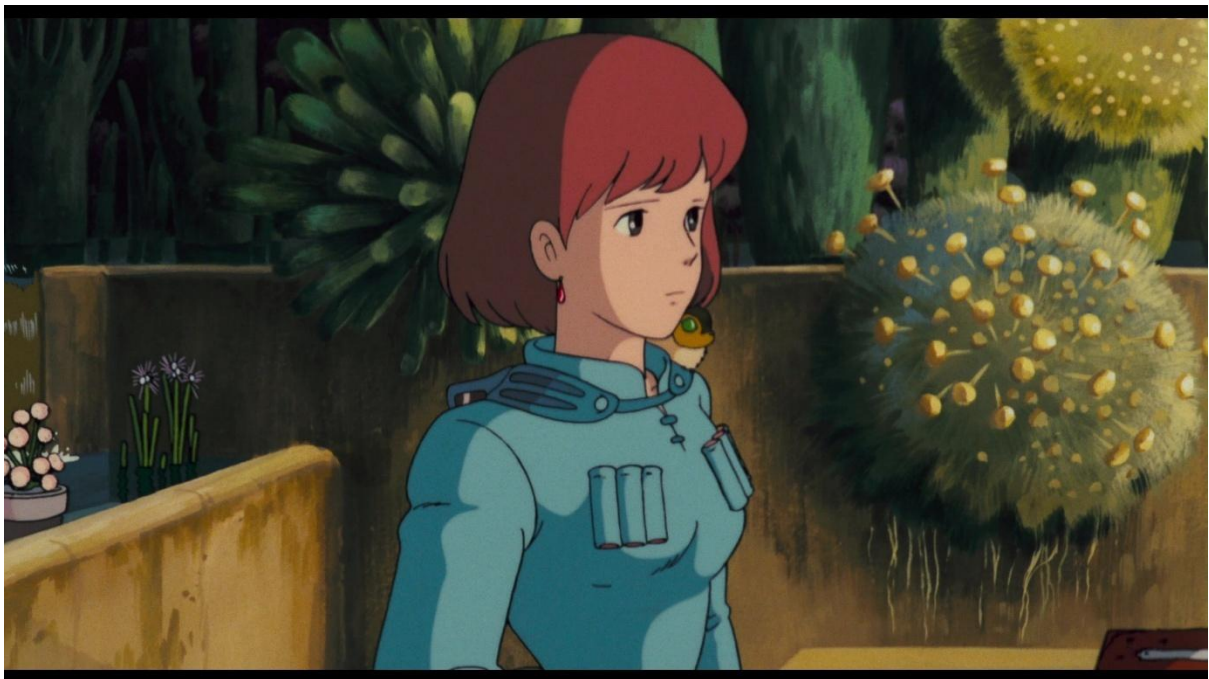


Figure 36: In the background, the plants glow in warm colours, making the space feel inviting and safe. Compared to the cooler blue tones of the Toxic Jungle which present it as a site of danger and hostility, especially to the characters who do not understand the Fukai and its purpose.

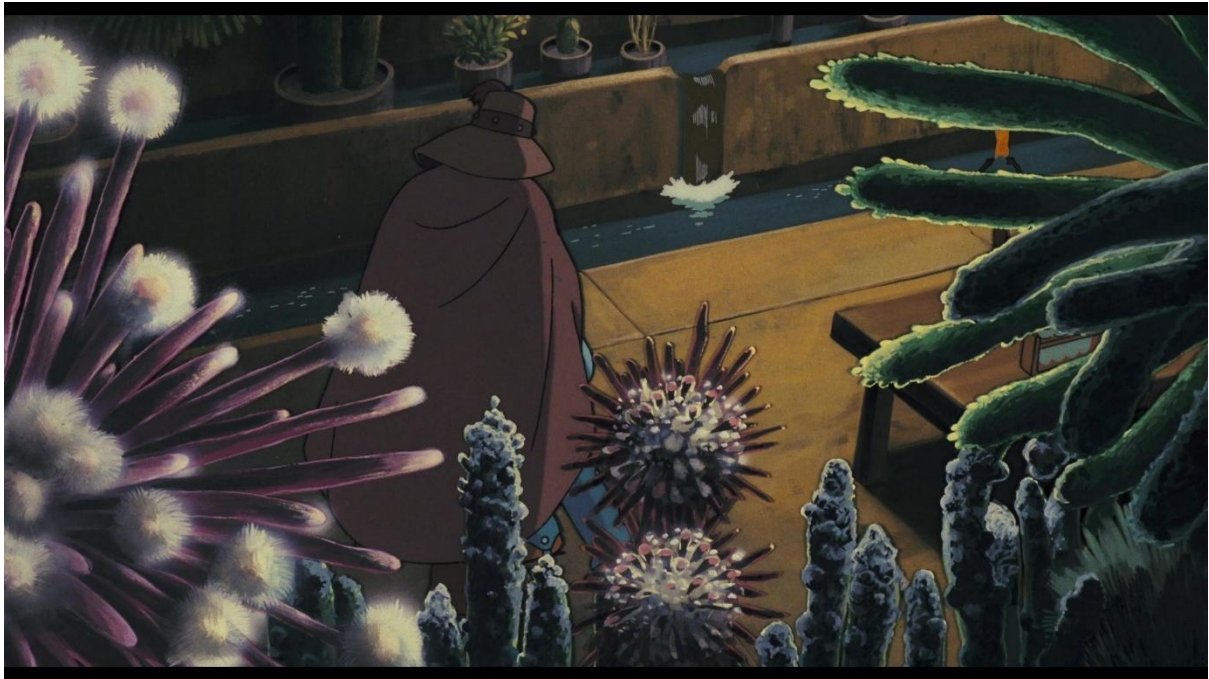


Figure 37: A close-up of one of the many plants Nausicaä grows in her underground garden. These plants look less menacing than those of the Sea of Decay.



Figure 38: Nausicaä at her work desk, Teto, her pet fox-squirrel, comforts her as she mourns.



Figure 39: A close-up of Nausicaä's instruments. Her table contains test tubes, for plant and spore collection from the Fukai. A journal, quill and ink-well sit to the side of her. Lord Yupa explores the space in the background. Taking in the plants Nausicaä cultivates.



Figure 40: This image clearly shows the layout of the plants and how Nausicaä is deliberate in the way she positions out the flora. Here, Lord Yupa discusses her findings of the Fukai and what it means for their post-apocalyptic world.



Figure 41: Nausicaä growing some plant samples in various ceramic containers. Lord Yupa is surprised to see that the plants of the Toxic Jungle are thriving without causing 'contamination' to the air.



Figure 42: In Nausicaä's underground garden, the plants are grown in a controlled manner, planted or potted into clean soil and irrigated with fresh water, free from the pollutants which make the surface world toxic.



Figure 43: The plants behind Lord Yupa are much cooler in hue and show the audience his somewhat narrow perspective and limited understanding of the Toxic Jungle.

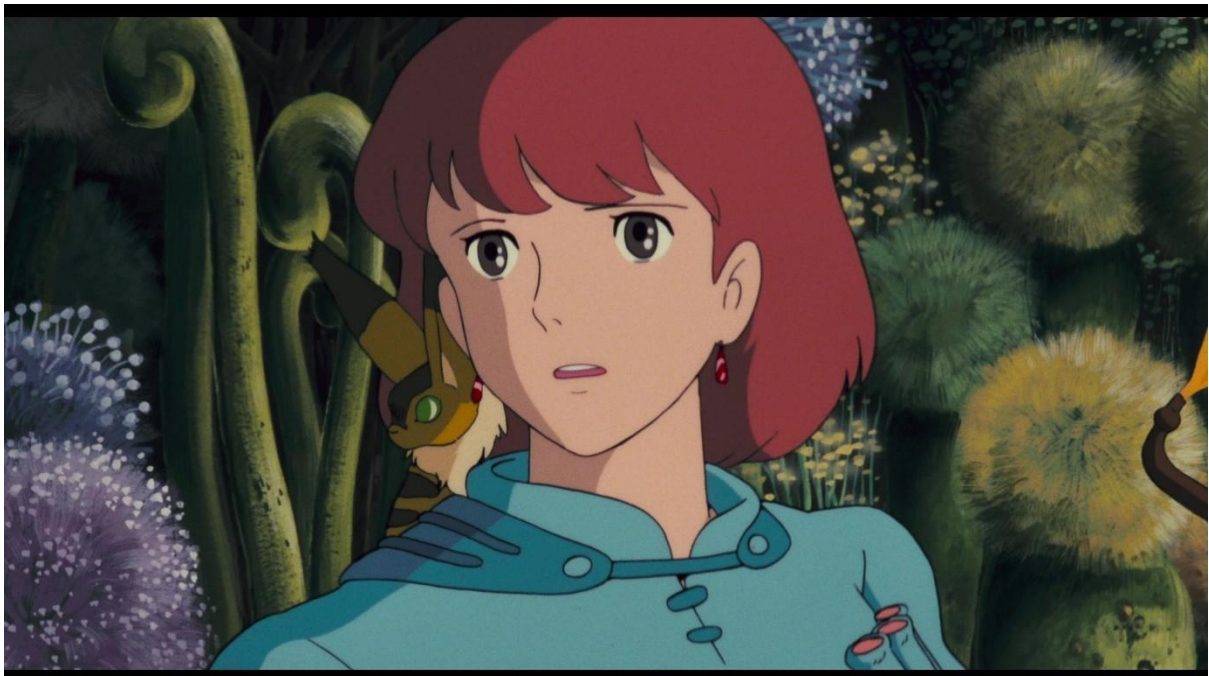


Figure 44: In this frame, Nausicaä and Lord Yupa discuss the true nature of the Sea of Decay. The glowing plants behind Nausicaä are in varying shades of green, yellow, pink and blue which reinforce her understanding of the Toxic Jungle.

A New World



Figure 45: Underneath the Sea of Decay lies a world of blue and silver. This crystalline space is a realm of renewal.



Figure 46: The giant trees look endless in size as they take up the entire frame.

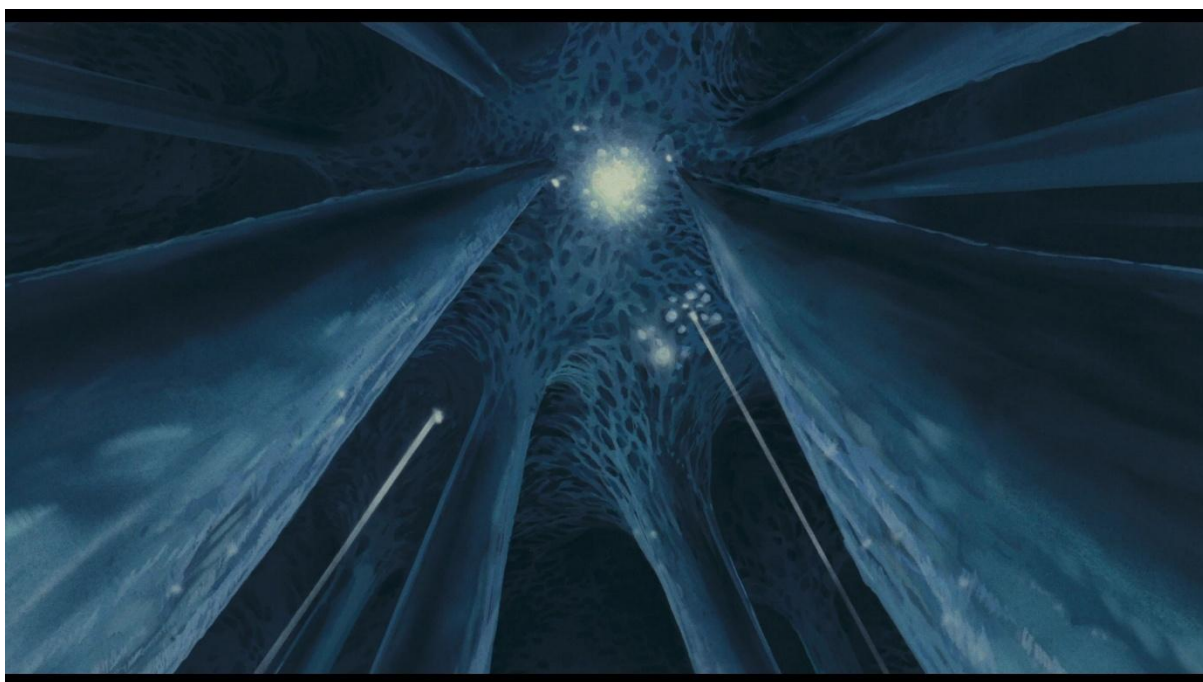


Figure 47 A pale yellow 'sun' in the world beneath the Sea of Decay.



Figure 48: Clean, filtered water flows in the underground space.



Figure 49: The stream flows between trees, breaking off into tributaries going past the edge of the frame.



Figure 50: Although Nausicaä is still in the centre, her size, compared to the other elements on screen, i.e. the giant trees, places her as 'insignificant' to the moment at hand.



Figure 51 The Giant Sequoia trees of Sequoia National Park are located in the central part of California. They resemble the giant crystalline trees in Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984).

Chapter Two

The Boar god's Demon Curse



Figure 52: Nago, the once boar god, now turned demon, crashes through the forest bordering Ashitaka's village and is intent on attacking any humans he sees.

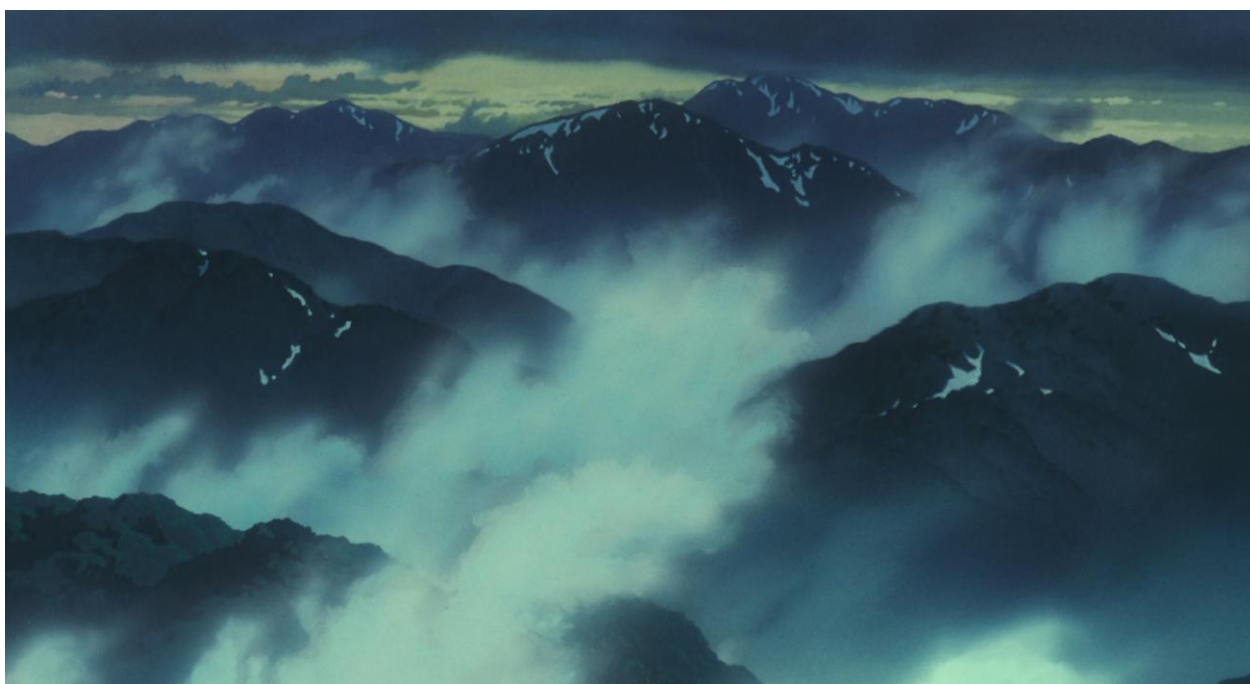


Figure 53: The opening frame in Princess Mononoke (1997).

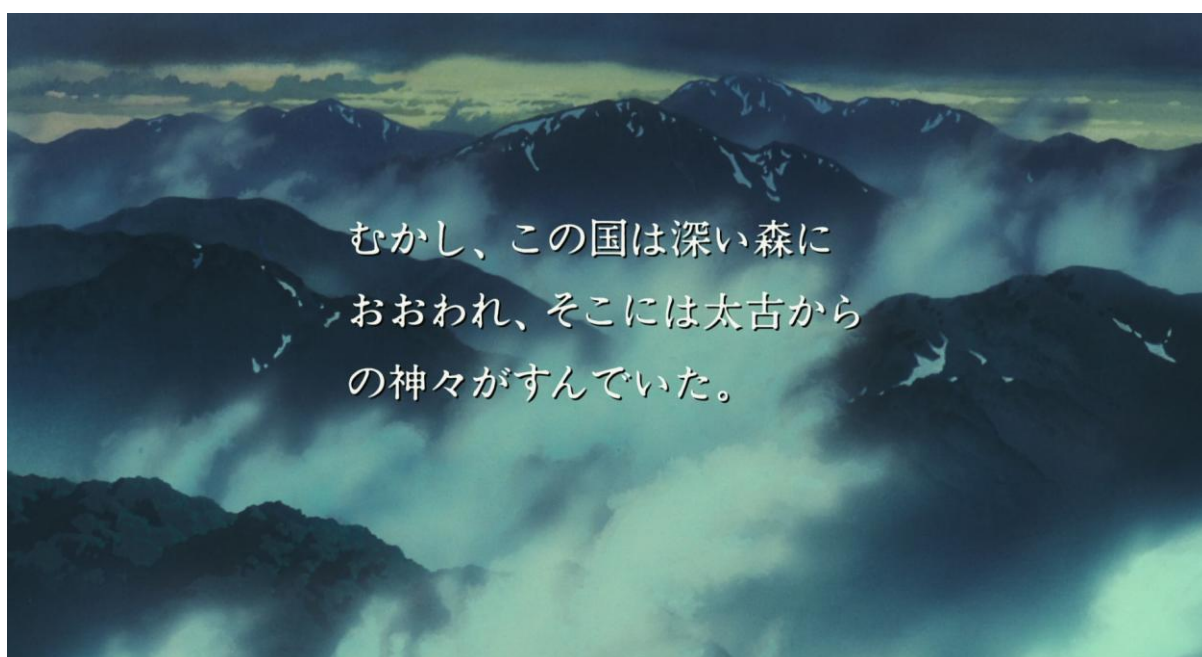


Figure 54: This screencap contains the words “In ancient times, the land lay covered in forests where from ages long past dwelt the spirits of the gods”, written in Japanese.



Figure 55: Nago trudging through the forest as the curse manifests itself as black writhing worms. These leech-like creatures have taken over his entire body and are consuming him.



Figure 56: The death which the curse leaves in its wake.



Figure 57: Ashitaka rides atop Yakul moments before they encounter Nago.

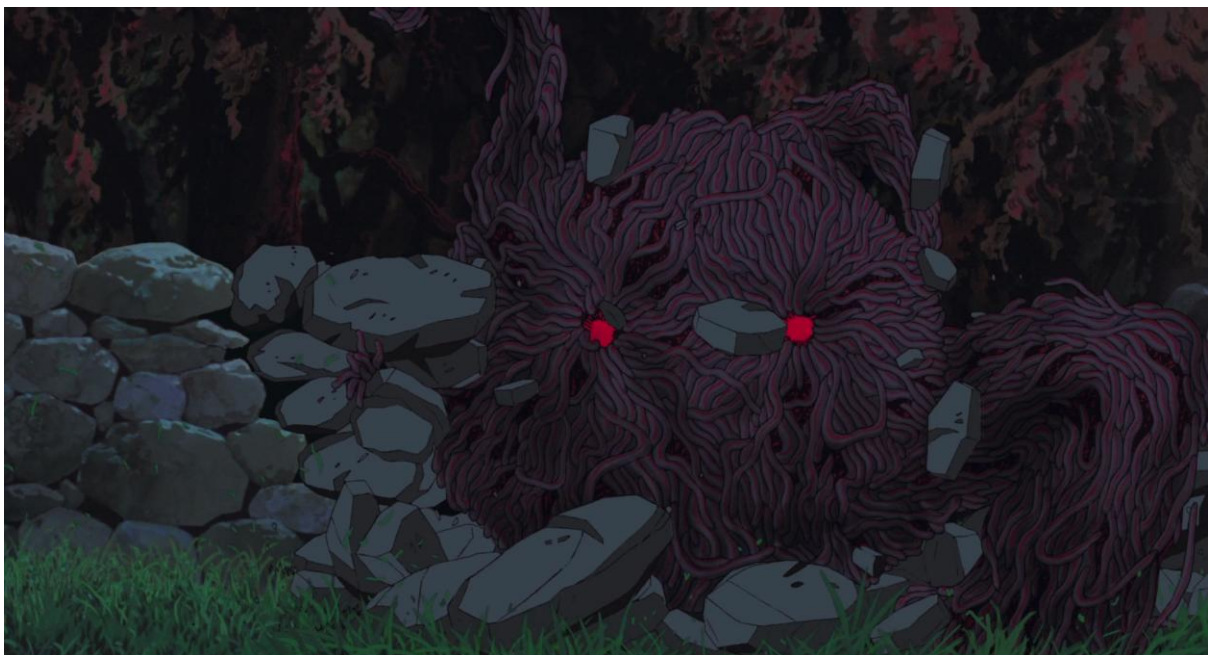


Figure 58: Nago, fully manifest as the curse, breaks the boulder boundary between the forest and Ashitaka's village.



Figure 59: The curse has turned Nago into another creature entirely. This transformation is symbolic of how humanity's negative impact on the environment renders the natural world unidentifiable.



Figure 60: After being shot with Ashitaka's arrow, Nago falls to the ground in a heap. The worm-like substance begins to drip from him, scampering away and spreading decay across the ground and surrounding areas. With his dying words, Nago utters a warning, which he extends to all the human characters in the film.



Figure 61: As soon as Nago takes his last breath, his body decomposes rapidly, leaving decay and the stench of death around his skeletal remains

Ashitaka Encounters the Forest Spirit and the *Kodama*.



Figure 62: The Forest Spirit begins its transformation in the evening, changing from its deer-like form and into the glowing Night Walker.



Figure 63: The Night Walker, fully transformed. In this frame, the first rays of sunlight have begun to break through the night. As this happens, the Night Walker makes its way back to the Ancient Forest and to its sacred pond, where it transforms back into the Forest Spirit.



Figure 64: The Kodama, which are small doll-like spirits, are only present if there is life and agency in natural spaces. Here, they guide Ashitaka, Yakul and the injured men through the Ancient Forest and to the Shishigami's Pond.



Figure 65: The Ancient Forest is full of life, embodied by the lush greens and flowing water as seen in this screencap.



Figure 66: Ashitaka comes across the paw/footprints of San, Moro and the two wolf cubs. This is the moment he realises that the wolf family resides in the heart of the Ancient Forest.



Figure 67: The flowing water in the Ancient Forest is so clean that Ashitaka can clearly make out a set of new tracks in the riverbed. These tracks, which belong to the Forest Spirit, are almost bird-like in appearance.



Figure 68: Ashitaka observes a herd of deer passing through a space between a giant mangrove of trees. He then spies a deer-like creature as the forest begins to radiate a brilliant golden light.



Figure 69: The Forest Spirit in its deer form, makes itself known to Ashitaka as the woodland begins to glow even brighter in its presence.

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