

“Nature as Neighbor: Landscape’s Relation to the Human in Studio Ghibli Films”

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Dr Carolyn Shapiro  
Falmouth School of Art  
Falmouth University, Cornwall

In this essay I am setting out to look at an alternative, non-metaphysical aesthetic to that of the Romantic Sublime by foregrounding the depiction of the human relation to nature, particularly to landscape, in the Japanese animated films produced by Studio Ghibli. This non-metaphysical aesthetic is characterized by a particular *relationality* whereby each signifier within the signifying system before us is in relay with each other. No primary signifier within the setting (such as a human figure) serves as a single focal point or as an anchoring signifier within the system. In other parlance, Studio Ghibli films tend to present us with networks of animated objects that act non-hierarchically upon each other. In the specific, foregrounded relation between human figures and figures within the landscape, the relation between signifiers is, I am proposing after one Ghibli film title, *neighborly*, and relationality is itself a thematic and dynamic element. This neighborly relationality, I am proposing, embraces the operation of signification itself, quite contrary to what comprised the resistance to any sort of introduction of the sign into the aesthetic of the Sublime.

Studio Ghibli, based in Tokyo, was founded in 1984 and headed by, among several others, directors Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata. Their animated films are characterized by stories about post-war Japan and consequent relations between humans and the environment. The films are widely popular for their exquisite hand-drawn animations and also because they have been distributed not only within Japan but also by Disney from 1996 onwards. Their aesthetic comes from the print culture of manga, from spiritual principles of the Shinto religion, as well as from influences of Western animation styles and principles. Quite a bit of scholarship has come about which looks at the environmental messages imparted by the Ghibli films, which often evince a melancholy over the demise of a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature in the face of post-war industrialism.

*My Neighbor Totoro*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki, was released in 1988 by Studio Ghibli in Japan and then distributed with English voiceovers by Disney in 2005. The plot is as follows: set in rural Japan in the late 1950s, a professor moves with his two young girls into a vacant old house that is in the vicinity of the girls’ mother, who is in hospital for an indefinite amount of time with a chronic illness. The two girls, Mei, who is about 6 years old, and Satsuki, who is about 12, explore the house and the surrounding woods and fields. As influenced by Shinto beliefs, their natural and built surroundings are inhabited by a myriad of invisible, or visible, spiritual beings-- even the dust balls in the old attic of the house are animated spirits. While playing on her own in the woods, the younger girl, Mei, discovers a gigantic gentle creature living in a giant camphor tree, which she names “Totoro.” Totoro is not a recognizable species of animal but a rather shapeless and friendly creature who lives in a spirit realm: he is not recognizable to all humans. He does reveal himself to Satsuki when the girls are waiting in the rain at a lonely bus stop for their father one night and his bus did not arrive as expected.

Totoro lives alongside the girls in the giant camphor tree in the woods next to the old house. He brings them seeds which grow overnight and he arranges to transport the girls through the skies with his friend, the flying cat bus. He seems to stand for all the natural surroundings, and all the landscape's spirit- beings. Despite his gargantuan size (including a gaping mouth with lots of teeth) and his generally unfamiliar appearance, he is friendly, helpful, loving, and, *neighborly*. He helps Satsuko to find Mei when Mei runs miles away to find her mother in the hospital. There is a cast of characters in the film which includes various humans, but also Totoro and his little mini-creatures, the dust spirits, the animated elements of the beautifully drawn landscape, and the sun and rain. The delight in viewing the film comes very much from the relay between all the magically animated objects in any given scene. The human protagonists, Mei and Satsuko, even though they are the protagonists, are equivalent animated objects to those objects surrounding them, both within the plot and in the animated scheme.

In her article for the journal *Public Culture*, entitled "Plasmatic Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film" (2014), Ursula K. Heise reads Studio Ghibli films as scenarios of an object-driven aesthetic which has progressive implications for environmental concerns. For Heise, Ghibli films, by virtue of being animated and Japanese (i.e., informed by Shintoism), present environments, particularly natural environments, as being inhabited by "objects in motion" (Heise, 303), proposing that the films express "an insistence that these environments are alive and populated by all manner of nonhuman agents." (Heise, 303) Heise follows current eco-critical philosophical thought such as that of Jane Bennett, who proposes a "vital materialism" whereby "agency emerges through relationships rather than as an inherent property." (Heise citing Bennett 2010, 307) As Heise traces, this agency coming about through relationality is also explored by the philosopher Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action" and its ethics of interconnectedness. Heise's valuable contribution, which I want to highlight here and build upon, is to identify that very same agency that comes about through relations between objects in motion, thereby shifting the primary ground of being itself to relationality rather than to an inherent essence of something, as a given within all animated film, and, in particular, through the animated films produced by Studio Ghibli. What we now understand, through philosophers such as Bennett, Barad, and others such as Timothy Morton, as a transformational shift over from humanist phenomenology to a more de-centralized and networked notion of "agency" which has progressive implications for the planet's ecology, has, observes Heise, "been playfully explored [by Japanese anime directors such as Hayao Miyazaki] since long before new materialist theories arose." (Heise, 308)

For my part, what I want to do, eventually by way of comparison of the Ghibli aesthetic to the Romantic Sublime aesthetic of the human relation to landscape, but at this point by detour into semiotics as an analytical framework, is to look at what is already the deconstructive intervention of the introduction of the Sign and the signifying systems which endow the sign with meaning. Here I take my cue from Samuel Weber's foregrounding of *differentiation* as the radically deconstructive intervention proposed by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*, also known as "semiology." Weber underlines, following Jacques Derrida, the primary break Saussure made in the philosophy of language as not simply the pulling apart of the

sign into the component parts of signifier and signified (also understood as the “arbitrariness of the sign”), which had already been theorized by some Classical Greek philosophers; but as the recognition of *differentiation* between signifiers, and differentiation between signifieds, thereby resulting in an operation of *articulation* as opposed to one of *representation*. (S. Weber, 1991, 26-28) Thus, in any given text we will have the differentiation between objects, between objects and subjects and between subjects, always at play. In this sense, by bringing back Derridean *différence* into eco-critical vital materialism, we can think more about representation in general and the play of signification in aesthetics of landscape. For me, this approach also brings language back into consideration, which I think sometimes gets put on the back burner in current philosophies of intra-object agencies.

In *My Neighbor Totoro*, the neighborly character of Totoro exemplifies and names a friendly relationality between him and the human characters of the film, and the dynamic play of signifiers within any given frame—whether they be various human characters, landscape vistas, rain falling, animated dust, or the giant Totoro himself, illustrates relationality itself and the equal distribution of objects-in-motion as befits, as Heise argued, the genre of film animation in general. Taking into account the specificity of the Studio Ghibli approach to animation philosophically, thematically and technically, we can see that the relation between human objects in motion and nature’s objects in motion is balanced and evenly distributed within the film. This non-hierarchical approach to the relationship between humans and the landscape is delightfully encompassed through the loveable figure of Totoro. Totoro and his lair, the giant camphor tree, are revered and respected by the children and their father, but it is a reverence based on equivalence within an ecological scenario. I want to put forth the proposition that it is the foregrounded relational play between signifiers and between signifieds that imparts this neighborly relation.

The deconstructive aesthetic of Studio Ghibli films might be further clarified by a comparison of their depiction of human-natural object relation, to that of what comprises the epitome of metaphysical aesthetics, the Romantic Sublime. A typical Sublime scenario attempts to deny signification, first in its very resistance to being received as “representation” (because “representation” presumes the possibility of the arbitrary); and second, in its constitutive phenomenological perspective which erases the play of objects in the fixing of perspective, in the diminishing of multiplicity, and in the primary purpose of creating subjective response, namely, dismay, astonishment or fear of apocalypse.

In James Ward’s painting of the Gordale Scar in West Yorkshire (1811), one of so many expressions of Sublime landscape inspired by the treatise on the Sublime and the Beautiful written by Edmund Burke (1757), and before Burke, by the ancient Greek philosopher Longinus, we know that even attempting representation of this overwhelming Sublime landmark was considered almost foolhardy. The Scar had been pronounced “unpaintable”: “the pencil, as well as the pen, has hitherto failed in representing this astonishing scene,” pronounced one artist and critic at that time (Nygren, 13). As if the introduction of mimetic representation itself devalues the Sublime (because its economy turns the scene into a mere object), the painter must opt instead to “record...its psychological impact on the viewer... [as] not one moment in space and time but [as] the totality of the experience.” (Nygren, 18, 28) Here, we can see the putting forth of human Consciousness as a kind of antidote to the interruption into the Absolute Oneness and infinity as effected by the introduction of

signification into something Sublime.

A close reading comparing the use of the same visual trope, the *Rücken* figure, by a Sublime painter, Caspar David Friedrich, and by Miyazaki in *Totoro*, helps to concretize the differences between a phenomenological metaphysical aesthetic, and a non-metaphysical, even deconstructive, one. In Figure 1, we see the classic *Rücken* figure of the *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818).

Immediately our eye goes to the figure of the man, and because we see him from the back, we place ourselves into his body and into the vast setting, which extends seemingly boundlessly from our gaze. We cannot help but be overwhelmed, dismayed; we are in a subjective state whereby the boundlessness before us will either encompass and unify us in its Oneness, or, perhaps, terrify us in its awesome power. There is a *relationality* between the human figure and the landscape, but it conveys a hierarchy and a dominance of one signifier over the other. The conscious Subjective state conveyed does its best to erase the play of relay and networking between many signified objects; the abstraction into Vastness resists any awareness of signification at work.

In contrast, a similar figure is drawn Figure 2, in which the girls and their father bow to Totoro's giant Camphor Tree. Unlike in the Friedrich painting, there is no separation between us and the figures; they are flat up against the foreground of the image. The fact that there are three figures bowing to the tree is relevant because it disperses the focal point and divides it, breaking up the totalizing Subjective identification effected by the single figure in the Sublime painting. We don't have the sense of infinity and boundlessness in the *Totoro* image, because the space does not recede in such a single-pointed perspective as it does in Friedrich's composition. A balance is relayed between the human figures, their bowing gesture, the Camphor tree, and the treetops, and the relay between them all takes place within definite parameters. We do not have the same sense of infinity in this image, but rather, an immediacy to that object which is being revered.

This immediacy signifies the neighborly relationality between humans and nature conveyed by the Studio Ghibli films, offering an alternative aesthetic to that of the Romantic Sublime which deconstructs Absolutes in all sorts of generative ways as it delightfully sets objects in motion before our eyes.

## References

Heise, Ursula, "Landscape Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film," *Public Culture* 26 (2014), 301-318.

Figure 1: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), accessed here: [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/rom\\_fri\\_wand.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/rom_fri_wand.html)



Figure 2: still shot, Hayao Miyazaki, *My Neighbor Totoro*, accessed here: <https://ekostories.com/2012/04/13/children-nature-totoro/>



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