Hayao Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, late 20th century (released October 29, 1999), cel and CG animation, 2h 13m, Studio Ghibli.
Hayao Miyazaki’s art style is renowned for its impressive naturalistic landscapes, clever combination of movement and color, and groundbreaking technique. He is able to shatter boundaries and create provocative fantasy worlds in an incredibly unique way, while spreading profound underlying messages. “The film’s sophisticated animation allows for a distinctive variety of nonhuman faces” (Napier). In *Princess Mononoke*, he is able to create emotion that allows viewers to build a bridge of empathy between human and nonhuman characters alike, not just through narrative, but through his dream-like and captivating animation.

“Hayao Miyazaki’s aversion to digital methods stemmed from his conviction [that] realism and reality do not have the same boundaries, because the less realistic styles can prove to be far more fitting than more photo realistic ones to capture reality’s essence” (Linghorn).

The more anime-like depiction of characters enables the viewers to create a visual-emotional bond and establishes a unique complexity, all while the distinguishing of their visual style versus the more realistic background enhances this effect. The movement of the characters against the painted landscape creates a sense of weightlessness and artistic captivation (Linghorn). Miyazaki’s juxtaposition of realism with non-realism proves to be his super power, especially with his combination of superflat characters among enchanting and mystical landscapes.

One of the most apparent feats of *Princess Mononoke* is this process of “world building” (Linghorn). One of the ways Miyazaki does this is through the “in-between” scenes that are used to transition the story. These parts are some of the most visually compelling aspects of his films. Ashitaka riding to the western lands is a great example of this imagery (pictured below). As he rides Yakul, there is a beautiful contrast between the moving characters and dynamic
background. His character is portrayed in a cartoonish, 2 dimensional sense, with flat colors, while the background is pragmatically detailed and more true to life.

“Studio Ghibli films often had a very interesting colour palette which consisted of multiple hues of the same base colour giving the landscapes a subtle realism, in contrast to the brightly coloured, lively animation which was added later after the backgrounds were finished in post-production” (Linghorn)

Although the characters are the focus of the film in a narrative sense, when analyzing Princess Mononoke visually, it is clear that the environment is the true substance (Linghorn). The clouds appear layered and gently move at different speeds. The colors of the mountains fade from an almost black green hue in the forefront and gradually saturate as they get visually smaller and “further away”. These visual components cooperate to create an authentic sense of depth. Ashitaka and Yakul are unblended blocks of color, outlined in black line drifting among a landscape that has no black outline and a wide color dynamic. The scene is ethereal, and creates a fantastic visual composition to emphasize the importance of nature in the film. The difference
in animation between the characters and the background also creates a union between the human and non-human characters, whether they are animals, spirits, or gods. Although San and the non-human characters fight to defend the forest, they are distinct from it. They are set apart from the setting in order to be visually amalgamated, which subtly sends a message that the humans and them may not be so different after all. Albeit in different ways, they are all equally cursed (Napier). Overall, the juxtaposed styles in the film compliment each other so effortlessly to create incredibly enchanting and captivating scenes through a combination of cel and CG animation. Miyazaki’s ability to combine such contradicting styles and methods is not easy to do, and the fact he does it so well truly encapsulates his raw talent (Linghorn).

Though the landscapes are more detailed, the characters also carry a kind of visual power that has its own special role in constructing the cinematic universe of *Princess Mononoke*. If you closely examine their movement, the animation seems slightly stilted, and there is a very subtle lagging, yet the movement still appears fluid. The emotions of the characters sometimes seem fixed and lack the subtle changing of a real human face. “The most visually emotional poses…lasted over many frames without actual movement” (Linghorn). The lasting stillness of certain expressions bring weight to the more intense emotions, although simply drawn. For most of the characters shadows define the shape of their figure, and lines signify the nose, lips, and contours of the body, while the eyes are solely black and white. Some of the characters are even caricature-like. When describing these cartoonish details, they seem like they would detract from the movie’s potency, but they actually highlight the character’s personas and stylize the film. There is personality in the animation and the exaggerated, straightforward, and still expressions are somehow easier to understand and connect to versus the emotions of a more realistic depiction. In fact, the most detailed characters are the aggressive and vengeful ones, such as the
boar god. The flatness of color and simplicity also makes many of the characters look soft and child-like, which evokes a distinctive sense of comfort. All the creative yet ironic visual aspects of *Princess Mononoke* define it as a masterpiece, along with its narrative. Without the distinctive and masterful style of Miyazaki, the film would lose a great amount of its luster and wonder. However, the narrative and its context are equally as important.

This movie is Hayao Miyazaki’s first *jidaigeki*, or historical film (Napier). It is one of his works that set him apart in the anime world and cemented him as an iconic household name in Japan (Napier). His message of peace and environmentalism markedly struck a chord with Japanese audiences (Napier). *Princess Mononoke* was released in 1999, during the Heisei period in Japan. Although tackling modern issues, the movie brings viewers back to 14th century Japan, depicting Ashitaka’s passage from his historic, rural village, to Irontown, Lady Eboshi’s western, industrial settlement. His journey represents Japan’s transition from tradition to modernization. Although beginning in the Meiji period, after World War II was when westernization and industrialization went full swing as Japan commercialized, becoming the forefront of innovation in mechanized production and technology. Lady Eboshi’s Irontown is a representation of this economic shift, and also the pollution it causes. Yet rather than purely villainizing her, Miyazaki adds complexity to her character by portraying the positive parts of industrialization alongside the negative. She may be a force of great destruction for the forest and its spirits, but she is a savior to her villagers. Many of Eboshi’s workers are marginalized people, lepers and former prostitutes with traumatic pasts, whose lives she turned around. She takes care of them and gives them a good life, and the townspeople work hard and view her with great love and reverence in return. She epitomizes the reality of humanity. Even though human beings are violent, greedy, and destructive, they are also compassionate and simply desire what is best for them and the
people they love. From one lens, the Lady can be viewed as selfish, but from the other she is benevolent. Although human industrialization causes harm to the environment, it has improved the lives of many. Miyazaki forces us to grapple with the nature of humanity. He also begs the question, does a good cause justify insurmountable destruction? Since the atomic bomb scarred Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending imperial Japan, this has been the perplexing question on the minds of many Japanese citizens. The West and its substantial influence is a double-edged sword, but either way, Japan’s troubled past still haunts its people.

The trauma from the war, atomic bombs, and also devastating earthquakes, has had a major impact on Japanese art. *Princess Mononoke* is a work that exemplifies this influence as it criticizes militarism and the spiritual depravity that is a result.

“[Miyazaki] hoped to create a work that would comment on Japan’s emptiness and confusion in the postbubble era. A country that had worshiped materialism and success seemed now to be floundering in a spiritual vacuum, reflected in the increasing use among contemporary Japanese of the word *kyomu*: emptiness.” (Napier)

Hayao believes the people of Japan have moved away from their shinto morals that call for them to worship and deeply respect nature and *kami*, spirits that are the essence of all natural things, in order to hyperfocus on material pursuits (Rowland). San is a character that represents the fight against this, to the point she no longer accepts the fact that she is a human. She chooses the gods and forest over them. After all, westernization is a human construct that is fueled by greed and destruction, and it has caused irreparable damage through pollution and war. The good it has created does not diminish the bad, and San portrays Hayao’s overwhelming sense of misanthropy. Westernization inherently contradicts shintoism, the major religion of the country, and the pain it has brought manifests spiritual dissolution as people desperately try to cope and
move forward, as represented by Irontown’s villagers. They may be glad to have a better life, but is it worth the cost of the world around them? San and Ashitaka show the cordiality that is possible between humans and nature, but *Princess Mononoke* is a message that the *kami* are fighting back. This ideology may be a result of the trauma from the Kobe and the Great Kantō Earthquakes. Referencing the earthquakes, “It seemed as if nature itself was seeking vengeance on human civilization.” (Napier). In the film, that is exactly the case.

The ending half depicts the fight between the spirits of the forest and San versus the humans, representing environmental destruction and natural disaster. Ashitaka desperately tries to be the unifying bridge of empathy, but the abhorrence between them is too strong. It concludes with the spirit of the forest’s head being stolen by the humans and it transforming into a dark entity. When the entity is shot with an arrow by Lady Eboshi, it releases black sludge that destroys everything it touches, symbolizing all the trauma and pain experienced by Japan’s people. However, once the head is returned by human hands, the being collapses, Irontown is
blown away, and the spirit’s essence spreads out and is embedded throughout the damaged forest, bringing back life and hope. The movie concludes with a tiny kodama on top of a fallen tree, bobbing its head, as if to suggest the innocent purity of the natural world still remains after the destruction. It is surrounded by budding sprouts, mending the forest with regrowth. The ending is nothing short of being deeply touching and profound, as it forces us to hold a mirror to ourselves and the world we live in. Maybe what Miyazaki believes Japan needs to heal is to return the proverbial head by restoring appreciation and respect to their natural deities through spirituality, non-violence, and environmentalism. It is time to return to the traditional ways, and reduce the damage modern humanity has caused by loving and nurturing nature. Although the forest spirit is gone, it still remains within all living things. Kami are still all around us, sprouting life, even amongst the ruin. Hayao Miyazaki is telling us that there will only be losers in this war, but it is not too late. The spirit of the forest is still with us. Now it is our turn to be with it.


*Canterbury Christ Church University*, repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/a404a167503a6e644acdb78aea204bab828d68dbe7bee47675d02272c00141e/1071920/James%20Linghorn%20Masters%20by%20Research1.pdf. Accessed 18 Feb. 2022.