

<Original Article>

The Marginal World and the Role of Water in the Films of Hayao Miyazaki

Chiaki Asai¹

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1 Introduction

Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea is a 2008 animated film from Studio Ghibli, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. *Ponyo*, inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's classic *The Little Mermaid*, is delightfully inventive. The story revolves around the childhood love and adventures of a fish girl and a little boy named Sosuke, whom she encounters during a curious outing to see the human world. Sosuke lives in a house on a cliff overlooking a small port town, and he names the little fish Ponyo and thus the title of the film, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. The animated film captures the wonder of being a child, and it presents an ecological message without reducing the entertainment value of the film. As with Miyazaki's past films, *Ponyo* touches upon various themes of ecology and environmentalism, this time focusing on the health and vitality of the oceans. The opening sequence is at times sobering when Ponyo encounters a boat that is scraping the ocean's floor, uncovering mountains of garbage and debris. Although Miyazaki says that "the vessel is trawling. It's a trawl net"

("Long Interview" 44), one can understand the anger and frustration of the character of Fujimoto, who has spent his lifetime trying to repair the damage that civilization has done to its oceans.

In this essay, I will explore the role of water in the films of Hayao Miyazaki focusing on *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. First I will look at the role of regenerative water in three major Miyazaki's films with environmental concerns : *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* (1984), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), and *Spirited Away* (2001). Next I will examine the

importance of the seashore setting in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. Then I will analyze the role of the transformative water in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, and finally, its significance in the real world we live in.

2 The Role of Water in Three Major Miyazaki's Films

Water is an essential element of nature – both the surface of the world and the constituents of our bodies are made up of about 70% water. In his *Water and Dreams*, Gaston Bachelard addresses the elemental substance of water as it plays throughout our lives, reveries, and literature. Furthermore, the interaction between water and humans has been one of the most popular motifs in fairy tales, folklore and mythology. Here, I will examine Miyazaki's use of magical water in three of his major films: *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*. All the three films contain regenerative water in the story, and the different roles given to water in them are linked to the central themes in each film.

In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds*, Miyazaki "highlights images of postindustrial (or even postapocalyptic) barrenness and devastation" (Napier 153). The story takes place one thousand years after the Seven Days of Fire, an apocalyptic war, which had destroyed human civilization and most of the Earth's original ecosystem. Scattered human settlements survive, isolated from one another by the Sea of Decay – a forest of giant plants and fungi swarming with giant insects. Everything in the Sea of Decay is lethally toxic. A charismatic young

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princess called Nausicaä frequently explores the Sea of Decay and conducts scientific experiments in an attempt to define the true nature and origins of the toxic world in which she lives. She discovers that the jungle is only toxic due to the toxic soil that covers the surface of the earth. When swallowed by quicksand, she ends up in a non-toxic world that is below the jungle. In that place, she realizes that the plants in the jungle purify the polluted topsoil, producing clean, untainted water that remains hidden in the underground world. In this film, only Nausicaä, as the possible savior of the world, can reveal the enigma of pure, regenerative water.

The regenerative water is also hidden in *Princess Mononoke*. In this highly acclaimed film, a young boy named Ashitaka leaves his people and journeys west. He finds an immense forest that is ruled by a fantastic deer-like spirit of the forest known as Shishigami. Supernatural creatures and clans of sentient animals live in the forest, and in the heart of which there is a quiet pond with occasional radiant shafts of light, dragonflies and butterflies flying above. Ashitaka finds the footprints of Shishigami in the pond, proof that Shishigami has visited the site. In the forest, he meets a young girl named San, "Princess Mononoke" of the title. San is brought up by a large female wolf, and she detests all humans. When Ashitaka is severely wounded and collapses in the forest, however, San cares for him, takes him to the middle of the pond, and presents him to Shishigami who eventually heals his wounds. Thus, water is instrumental in bringing Ashitaka back to life.

In *Spirited Away*, a ten-year-old girl Chihiro gets lost in a spirit world. Along with escaping, she has to save her parents who have turned into pigs as a result of eating food meant for spirits. Chihiro encounters a strange boy Haku on the bridge between a forsaken amusement park and a grand bathhouse that spirits go to for relaxation. Andrew Osmond points out that Haku shows his virtue by dispelling fear with the words: "In the name of the water and the wind within thee, unbind her!" (64). Haku helps Chihiro to get into the bathhouse where she takes a job working for Yubaba. In making a

contract with Chihiro, Yubaba changes her name to Sen using a Chinese character from her original name.

In this film, the force of regenerative water is shared by two major characters: Sen (Chihiro) and Haku. Haku warns her if she forgets her real name, she will be trapped forever; he himself cannot remember his own. Later, Sen discovers Haku is actually a white dragon. When Haku is attacked and seriously wounded in this form, Sen rescues him and goes to see Zeniba, Yubaba's twin sister, to ask her to lift the curse from him. Meanwhile, fully-recovered Haku appears in his dragon form to pick up Sen. On their way back from Zeniba's house to Yubaba's bathhouse, Sen remembers that she fell into a river when she was little, and the water carried her away to the shore, and that the river's name was the Kohaku River. This enables Haku to call up his memories who cries "I remember I was the spirit of the Kohaku River" ("Screenplay" 235). Shingles fly off the dragon, and Haku turns back into a person. They are tied through the Kohaku River before Chihiro's adventure in the realm of the spirits starts.

In the three films above mentioned, water is used to purify the world, to regenerate the living things, and to stir up long-forgotten memories respectively.

3 Dynamics at the Edge

In this section, I will look into the importance of the seashore setting in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, as most meetings and events in the film happen either at the edge or at the bottom of the sea. The following is Miyazaki's aim as a director:

A little seaside town and a house at the top of a cliff. A small cast of characters. The ocean as a living presence. A world where magic and alchemy are accepted as part of the ordinary. The sea below, like our subconscious mind, intersects with the wave-tossed surface above. By distorting normal space and contorting normal shapes, the sea is animated not as a backdrop to the story, but as one of its principal characters. ("A Small Seaside Town" 11)

Here, Miyazaki claims that the sea itself is a principal character. Rachel Carson, a marine biologist and writer of three highly acclaimed books on oceans, also depicts the sea as a central character (*Lost Woods* 56). Carson tells the readers that “the edge of the sea is a strange and beautiful place” where magical things would happen (*The Edge of the Sea* 1-2). She articulates her views on four characteristics of the seashore. (1) It remains an elusive and indefinable boundary, as the shoreline is never the same on successive days. (2) It has a dual nature, changing with the swing of tides, belonging now to the land, now to the sea. (3) Only the most hardy and adaptable can survive in a region so mutable, yet the area between the tide lines is crowded with plants and animals. (4) The shore is an ancient world. Yet it is a world that keeps alive the sense of continuing creation and of the relentless drive of life.

In *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, the four characteristics are clearly seen. Sosuke’s house on the cliff is marginal both vertically and horizontally. It is situated between the sky and the sea as well as between the land and the sea. The boundaries are sometimes blurred by billowing, creature-like waves. The morning after the storm, the town is flooded and the promontory becomes an island. Sosuke’s house is almost submerged, and the sky and the sea are merged over the horizon. This sense of ambiguity makes it a perfect meeting place for different species, such as a fish girl and a human boy. It also prepares us to accept a temporary suspension of our ordinary notion of time. The seaside town is based on a contemporary Japanese small town along the Seto Inland Sea. However, what Sosuke and Ponyo see underwater are prehistoric fish of the Devonian Age, along with fish and shellfish usually seen today. The underwater world is a dreamscape. The ancient creatures swim over asphalt roads, past stop signs and over guard rails as if they have reclaimed the world. It is a magical world unconstrained by time, teeming with fish, and full of vitality. I would argue that the seashore setting of Sosuke’s house contributes greatly to the displacement of time and space.

4 The Transformative Power of Water in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*

As we have seen in the second section, water is given a sense of regeneration in Miyazaki’s animated films. In *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, Ponyo’s father Fujimoto collects “The Water of Life.” Formerly human, Fujimoto refines vast quantities of the water of life and creates jellyfish and other creatures in order to restore the world to its original fertile state. Pouring the water of life into the well, Fujimoto says, “When this well is full, the Age of the Ocean will begin again. An explosion of life to match the Cambrian Age. An end to the era of those abominable humans.” Fujimoto wants to keep Ponyo from poisonous human elements, but Ponyo’s desire to become human is so strong that he is unable to contain her any more. During her breakout, Ponyo unintentionally releases Fujimoto’s well of magical elixirs, which unleashes all sorts of magical sea creatures and causes a violent storm in the seas surrounding Sosuke’s town. The power of the magical elixirs is so strong that Ponyo is transformed, within explosive gold torrents of water, from her half-fish, half-human form into a human child. However, Ponyo’s magical power has torn a hole in the world, threatening the planet. Desperate to resolve Ponyo’s rebellion, Fujimoto calls upon the help of Ponyo’s mother, Gran Mamare, who is a symbol of the feminine principle, producing all underwater life as the Mother of the Sea.

In this film, the transformative water is potent; it has dangerous as well as regenerative power. It is notable that water is dominant even in the scenes on the land, as Ponyo, born from the sea, comes to the land and bonds with Sosuke, a human boy. Water is seen to gain the transformative power in the foreground of the screen. The violent power of water is asserted more clearly in this film than it is in the previous ones. The power of water is most formidable at the marginal world.

5 Verisimilitude and the Real World

In the finale of *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, the

small seaside town is restored completely without any damage by the storm, the tsunami, and flooding. The people of the Sunflower House are brought back to the surface by Fujimoto's ship. The water world rejuvenates the elderly women, enabling them to walk again. Ponyo is transformed into the human girl of Sosuke's age as she has wanted to be. In the last scene, the bubble containing Ponyo bounces up, kisses Sosuke, and turns into a little girl. Apparently, the transformative power of water brings good results.

The ending is ambiguous, however, because both Ponyo and Sosuke are five years old and they have long years to go. Sosuke's responsibility in taking on the transformed Ponyo is huge and no one knows what will become of them. This uncertainty represents "the fate of humanity after the twenty-first century," as the director makes a point of saying, and "it's beyond the task of one film to solve the issue" (*Orikaeshi Ten* 495). *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* is a fantastic story using the setting of the seashore to its advantage. It vivaciously shows the love and adventures of children.

The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on 11 March 2011 with the epicenter approximately 130 kilometers east of the Oshika Peninsula of Tohoku and the hypocenter at an underwater depth of approximately 24 kilometers. The earthquake was powerful and triggered extremely destructive tsunami waves along the Pacific coast of Tohoku. The run-up height reached to 37.9 meters, traveling up to 10 kilometers in some cases. In addition to loss of life and destruction of houses, factories, and public buildings, the tsunami caused a number of nuclear accidents in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant Complex. Needless to say, the taintless restoration after a forceful tsunami in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* would not happen in the real world.

Horrifying power of the tsunami reminds some people of the scenes from *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. In fact, the film can be seen as an illustration of what has happened in March 2011; the tsunami, the sea that invades the land, boats swept away, people seeking refuge wherever they can. The tsunami's

almost black color in the film seems real after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the tsunami. In July, four months after the disaster, the Nihon TV broadcasting company excluded to air *Ponyo* during the campaign for the upcoming Ghibli film, in which they broadcasted other well-known Ghibli films. The self-restraint was understandable considering that TV is a medium anyone can watch and the memories of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami are too immediate. However, the larger point here is that the film does not represent the real world but that it creates the world of its own although it has certain degree of verisimilitude to its merit. Miyazaki is talented in interweaving reality and fantasy, and the audience should accept it as it is within the film. The Japanese Archipelago has been repeatedly hit by earthquakes, typhoons and tsunamis. On the other hand, it enjoys a rich natural world. We have to cope with the current ordeal, and probably it is time we should start thinking about what kind of civilization we would like to make in the future.

* An early version of this paper was presented at the 2nd ASLE-Korea and ASLE-Japan Joint-Symposium on Literature and Environment at Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul on 31 October 2010.

** The quoted factual details on the Great East Japan Earthquake come from the English version of the reference booklet [As of July 20, 2011] compiled by the Japan Science and Technology Agency.

"The Great East Japan Earthquake Information from Official Websites." http://www.jst.go.jp/pr/pdf/great_east_japan_earthquake.pdf. 2011-07-20.

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<原著論文>

宮崎駿映画における境界の世界と「水」の役割

浅井 千晶

要 約

『風の谷のナウシカ』、『もののけ姫』、『千と千尋の神隠し』といった宮崎駿の映画において、「水」は世界を浄化し、生物を静かに受容し、記憶の揺籃となる存在である。近作『崖の上のポニョ』においても水は重要な役割を担っているが、この作品は海辺と海底をめぐる物語であるため水の力はより強大で、その恵み深い側面よりむしろ暴力的な変容をもたらす力が描かれる。また、海辺という海と陸の境界の場は、異なる時空、人間の日常世界と魔法にみちた世界、現実と幻想の境界にあるダイナミックな物語を成立させている。

『崖の上のポニョ』は現代の日本を舞台にしており、自然災害の描写にも迫真性があるが、作品世界内の出来事として受容し、自然の意味を再考することは可能であろう。

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