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Zen and the Art of Environmental Education in the Japanese Animated Film *Tonari no Totoro*

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Abstract

The animated film *Tonari no Totoro* (My Neighbour Totoro) vividly depicts the interaction of people, forest spirits and nature in rural Japan. This article analyses the film both in its original Japanese and in two dubbed English versions, in relation to the film's potential to contribute to environmental awareness. The starting point is a discussion of the limitations of current environmental education, in particular its focus on the abstract, the global, and the technical, at the expense of detailed observation of local ecosystems and the discovery of value within those systems. This is followed by analysis of *Tonari no Totoro*, focusing on how ecological insights drawn from Zen, Shintō and traditional Japanese culture are subtly woven into the film. The conclusion describes how the visual and linguistic features used in the film have the potential to promote a form of ecological consciousness closely attuned to the local environment.

1.1 Introduction

Tonari no Totoro is a hand-drawn animated film produced by Miyazaki Hayao¹ and released in Japan by Studio Ghibli in 1988 (Ghibli 1988). The film portrays the interaction of humans, nature and forest spirits in rural Japan, and has gained a significant following due to what film critic Kanō Seiji describes as 'its extremely original and powerfully persuasive ways of representing nature' (Kanō 1998).²

This article investigates whether, like *haiku*, *sadō* (the tea ceremony), *shodō* (calligraphy) and other cultural art forms, animation of the type used in *Tonari no Totoro* has the potential to draw out ecological insights from Zen and Shintō traditions and make them available to a popular audience. If so, it is an art form which has the power to cross borders. Indeed, *Tonari no Totoro* has been released in two English dubbed versions, one by Fox in 1993 (Fox 1993), and another, more recently, by Disney in 2006 (Disney 2006). The arrival of *Tonari no Totoro* with its Zen-like and subtly animistic portrayal of human interaction with nature, in the midst of a Western culture suffering increasing alienation from the natural world, brings with it the potential to contribute to new forms of environmental education.

¹ Japanese names are written in the normal Japanese order of surname followed by given name.

² All translations of quotations from Japanese articles and the dialogue of the film are by the author unless specified otherwise.

1.2 On the art of environmental education

As the ecological crisis worsens, the importance of environmental education across all educational contexts, formal and informal, for people of all ages, has become increasingly recognised. At the same time, some of the limitations of environmental education as it is usually envisaged have also come to light (Bowers 2001, Cooper 1992, Orr 1992, Smith and Williams 1999, Sterling 2001, Stone and Barlow 2005). One such limitation is the way that environmental education tends towards statistics, technical knowledge, and global abstractions, without simultaneously grounding the abstract in concrete awareness of natural systems and the very real consequences of environmental destruction. The common injunction to ‘think globally, act locally’ may be partly to blame, because a global ‘environment’ is difficult to apprehend directly. David Yencken, chair of the Sustainability Program Committee for Australia 21, suggests a focus on both the global and the local:

If we do not think locally, we may ignore rich sources of environmental knowledge and devalue local understanding and experience... If we do not act globally, we will never solve the big issues of the global commons: atmospheric and ocean pollution (Yencken 2000: 4).

One benefit of thinking locally, and carefully observing the ecosystems of the local bioregion across the seasons, is a deeper understanding of the way that natural systems work. Perhaps even more importantly, close observation of the local bioregion has the potential to help develop a firsthand understanding of the *value* of healthy natural systems, that is, the value of the flourishing of life. Without appreciation of value, knowledge and technical skills are directionless.

Fritojf Capra, a leading holistic scientist, recommends an approach to environmental education which includes both technical knowledge of ecological principles, and values that are necessary to guide that technical knowledge (Capra 2005: xiv). David Orr’s concept of *environmental literacy* is similar. In addition to the capacity to understand scientific principles, Orr suggests that ecological literacy requires:

the more demanding capacity to observe nature with insight. ... People who do not know the ground on which they stand miss...the capacity to distinguish between health and disease in natural systems and their relationship to health and disease in human ones. If literacy is driven by the search for knowledge, ecological literacy is driven by the sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world (Orr 1992: 354).

There is a danger that environmental education represents the environment only negatively, as something which can give us skin cancer because of holes in the ozone layer, or something which can poison us through pollution, or something which can flood our homes because of climate change. This is all vital, but it is also important to explore positive aspects of the environment, for example, the environment as a rich source of contact and connection with a myriad of other species. Connection with local natural systems offers the possibility not only of understanding and caring more about the ecosystems which support life, but also finding ways of fulfilling important human needs through appreciation of local nature rather than vainly trying to satisfy them through ever increasing consumption.

Broadening a preoccupation with abstractions and toxins to include a more grounded form of direct understanding and appreciation of natural systems is not easy, however, because environmental education operates primarily through the medium of words. Overcoming the abstraction of words and encouraging direct unmediated experience is something that is at the core of Zen.

1.3 On Zen

The term ‘Zen’ is not limited to formal disciplines such as the *Rinzai* and *Sōtō* branches of Zen Buddhism, but encompasses ways of approaching life and aesthetics which have been influenced by Zen Buddhism and become widely integrated into traditional Japanese culture. Matsuo Bashō is credited with infusing a Zen perspective into *haiku* poetry (Suzuki 1970: 239); Takeno Jō and his successor Sen Rikyū are described as weaving Zen into the tea ceremony (Sen 1979: 62); and Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, is known for bringing Zen into martial arts. The meditative spirit of Zen, divorced from monastic rituals, has been incorporated into many other cultural forms, including poetry, the tea ceremony, architecture, pottery, calligraphy, painting, and landscape design. Animation may provide yet another path for Zen perspectives to become infused into everyday life, and contribute to environmental awareness.

Drawing on ecological perspectives across cultures and time spans is a treacherous path, however. There are those like Arthur Danto (1987) who claim that Eastern thinking is just too different from Western thinking ever to be assimilated, and those like Arne Kalland (2002) and Saito Yuriko (1992) who argue that Zen has failed to make Japan an ecologically responsible country and contains features that facilitate ecological degradation. Clearly, though, Zen was not designed specifically to address current ecological problems, and the question for environmental education is not whether Zen as a whole contributes to sustainability, but whether insights can be drawn from Zen to complement existing approaches and make them more effective at contributing to sustainability.

There are several aspects of Zen which could potentially be drawn on to contribute to environmental education. The ethicist Simon James sees in the Zen insistence on paying careful attention to phenomena something close to the environmentalist notion of intrinsic value (James 2003: 156, 2004: 83). Robert Carter similarly describes how the locus of Zen ethics extends beyond human relational concerns to appreciation of and responsibility for the natural world, claiming that the self expanded (or disbanded) through Zen practice ‘identifies with the greater whole, seeks to preserve it, cherish it, is emotionally enraptured by it and cares about its wellbeing’ (2001: 115). Such identification could, in turn, lead to the ‘Zen ideals of simplicity, frugality, and poverty in relation to land use so that nature is not exploited out of selfish motivations’ (Odin 1997:100).

It is, of course, arguable whether Zen contains ‘ethics’ or ‘ideals’ as such, but for environmental education, what may have most potential is Zen’s insistence on direct experience of what D.T. Suzuki (1970) calls ‘isness’ or ‘suchness’, and James (2003:156) calls ‘the thing at hand - the thing in its thusness’. Environmental education is usually full of abstraction, exposing students primarily to words rather than to actual plants, animals and natural systems. The words themselves often lack referents which can be sensually experienced or imagined: the term ‘environment’ itself is one of them, as are terms like ‘biomass appropriation’, ‘habitat loss’, ‘endangered species’, ‘ecosystem’ and ‘biodiversity’ (Stibbe 2005a, 2005b, Bourke & Meppem 2000: 299). On the other hand, Zen may offer the possibility of a more direct, sensual and

phenomenological experience of natural systems, as an essential complement to more abstract ways of knowing. Suzuki explains that:

Zen does not...indulge in abstraction or in conceptualisation. ...When the mind, now abiding in its isness ... free from intellectual complexities ... surveys the world of the senses in all its multiplicities, it discovers in it all sorts of values hitherto hidden from sight. Here opens to the artist a world full of wonders ... (1970: 16-17).

The question is whether Japanese animation, like other forms of Japanese art, has the potential to encourage direct experience of natural systems, and open people up to the sense of wonder identified by those like Suzuki and Orr. If so, the further question arises of whether animation can contribute cross-culturally to environmental education through translation into other languages. These questions are explored through analysis of one particular example of animation – *Tonari no Totoro* by Miyazaki Hayao – in both its original Japanese version and two English translations.

1.4 On Miyazaki Hayao and *Tonari no Totoro*

Miyazaki Hayao, the producer of *Tonari no Totoro*, is well known for interweaving deep ecological themes and aspects of traditional Japanese culture into his films. Although he has not formally trained in Zen or Shintō, he clearly has a deep respect for both. The following passage reveals his familiarity with and fondness of Shintō animism:

In my grandparents' time, it was believed that spirits [*kami*] existed everywhere – in trees, rivers, insects, wells, anything. My generation does not believe this, but I like the idea that we ... should treasure everything because there is a kind of life to everything (Miyazaki in Boyd and Nishimura 2004: 16).

While the environmental message of *Tonari no Totoro* is not as explicit as some of his other films, it is clear that Miyazaki did intend *Tonari no Totoro* to provide environmental insights. In a 1988 interview, shortly before the film was released, he expressed the motivation behind the film as follows:

[*Tonari no Totoro* is] for children and their parents to watch together; it's about Japan; it's about the place that they live in, and it's a film which allows parents and children to communicate together. Of course, it had to be a fun and exciting movie, but at the same time, I wanted it to be a film where viewers relate Japan's future environmental and ecological problems to the condition of the society which surrounds them (Miyazaki 1988).

In other words, the film is designed to encourage the kind of intergenerational dialogue about the value of disappearing local ecosystems and cultural traditions that are essential to environmental education (see, e.g., Bowers 2001, 1993).

The plot of *Tonari no Totoro* is relatively straightforward. Two girls (Mei and Satsuki, age 5 and 11) move to the countryside with their father to be nearer to their mother who is hospitalized with an illness. In exploring their new world, they encounter, with delight, a wide range of natural and supernatural phenomena, from tadpoles to the giant forest spirit *Totoro*. The

Totoro and the *Catbus* (a creature who is an unusual cross between a cat and a bus) help the girls when Mei gets lost en route to visit her mother in the hospital.³

1.4.1. Analysis and discussion

Tonari no Totoro is entirely hand drawn animation, a medium which allows intricate and detailed artwork for elements which are relatively static, but cruder drawing for elements which move (Lamarre 2002). This immediately separates elements into two groups: the intricate and the simplified. The human characters and the supernatural creatures are all drawn in the simplified style: line drawings filled in with unmodulated and relatively saturated colours. On the other hand, all natural elements are drawn in the intricate style: the colours are highly modulated, involving many different shades with complex patches of shadow. Aside from small yellow, blue or purple flowers, and the blue of the sky, the colours used in the intricate style are mostly subdued, natural shades of green and brown, resulting in extremely realistic portrayals of nature in rural Japan.

The majority of backgrounds in the film show common wild plants, trees and summer flowers, mixed with areas of agricultural land, and houses or shrines made from local materials such as wood and rush. These are all depicted in an intricate, realistic style, emphasising how human cultivation and artefacts were an integral part of local ecosystems in traditional Japan. The humans are depicted in the simplified style, making them appear separate from their surroundings, which is a potential disadvantage for environmental education, since it fails to capture human embeddedness in natural systems. It does, however, highlight the realness and beauty of the natural world, without letting nature become overshadowed by the human characters or the appealing, fantastic creatures.

The separation between humans and nature created by the dual modality of the film is partially compensated for through visual techniques. One such technique involves medium or long shots of human characters, with wild plants at the bottom in the immediate foreground, the humans behind them in the mid-foreground, and trees and fields in the background. This technique helps to make the human characters appear more embedded in their environment. In addition, the film does not portray phenomena as existing separately, but instead represents a complex interaction between humans, non-human nature, sacred elements, and supernatural creatures. The discussion below describes these four central aspects of the film and their relationship with each other.

1.4.2 The natural

Nearly all scenes in the film include intricately drawn, realistic aspects of nature: groves of wild trees, rice fields, wild plants, flowers, animals, clouds, rain, rocks and streams. In some cases these are in the background, adding beauty while the focus is on the activities and goals of the characters. This represents a superficial relationship with nature, where nature provides nice scenery while the mind is preoccupied with other things. Some scenes focus on natural phenomena only, but use them to give a semiotic message: a gradually lightening tree indicates a new day has started; a shot of dark clouds indicates that rain is about to fall; birds fly across the sunset, indicating that darkness will soon overcome the lost Mei.

Importantly, though, the film also incorporates a different way of representing nature where, for one continuous shot, the focus is intently on natural phenomena, depicted for their own sake rather than for the sake of adding a fact to the story. In one such moment, there is a cut

³ For a more detailed summary of *Totoro*, with illustrations, see Wallace 2006.

from the truck carrying the family to their new house, to a shot of a stream. A single green leaf floats down the stream into a small waterfall; the water glints in the sunshine and the only sound is that of the water. The contrast is clear: the movement of the family is purposeful, with the goal of arriving at the new house, which is an essential step in the plot of the film. The leaf, on the other hand, floats along the stream without obvious purpose, its significance being purely in itself.

A leaf floating in a stream is exactly the kind of small natural occurrence that the audience may miss in their everyday lives as they rush around serving their own purposes. When watching the film, however, they are forced to notice the leaf, and their attention is drawn to it though its central position, by its colour salience (a green leaf in a brown river), by its movement, and because it is framed by the banks and rocks. It is also framed in time, since there is a definite cut to the leaf from a quite different scene (the truck), and a definite cut away after the leaf falls (a return to the truck).

The framing of a minute part of ordinary nature, depicted artistically yet realistically, is a way of imbuing it with significance and value, encouraging a form of environmental consciousness that appreciates local nature down to the smallest detail. There are many such scenes in the film: a butterfly flits in from the top right hand corner and settles on a flower in the centre; a snail slithers up the stem of a pumpkin leaf; a drop of water falls into a stream, ripples spreading out in all directions; a frog walks slowly from left to right across the centre of the screen in the rain; a drop of rain falls in a puddle with an audible plop; a frog slowly lets out a deep croak.

In all of these scenes the natural phenomenon being framed for special attention is moving, but is painstakingly drawn in the intricate and realistic mode of drawing, making these scenes particularly realistic in contrast with the simplified style of human characters. Evidence that Miyazaki places importance on these natural shots can be found in the original theatrical trailer to the film, which is a montage of the most visually appealing parts of the film, and includes several of these shots.

There are strong parallels between the framing of nature in these moments in the film and in the Zen-based tradition of *haiku*. Firstly, both *haiku* and the nature shots are brief, lasting around four seconds, and focus on just one particular animal, plant or other aspect of nature. Secondly, in both cases the focus is on framing ordinary nature, of the kind people come across in their everyday life. Thirdly, and most importantly, the framing is done in an artistic way which reveals the hidden beauty of the ordinary. Frogs, butterflies, leaves, streams, snails and the sound of water are common themes in *haiku*. The following *haiku*, by Bashō, is one of the most famous, and captures such themes:

Furuike ya	An old pond
Kawazu tobikomu	A frog leaps in
Mizu no oto	Sound of the water

In a major movement within *haiku* writing, championed most prominently by the last of the four ‘grand masters’ of haiku poetry, Shiki, towards the end of the 19th century, metaphor and symbol are carefully avoided, and phenomena of nature are depicted as genuinely as possible. Ōdin puts this eloquently in his description of the poetry of the twelfth century *waka* poet, Saigyō:

The aesthetic and spiritual symbols of Saigyō's nature poetry do not point beyond themselves to a transcendent or supra-sensible reality over and above the natural world, but fully contain the reality which they symbolize (1997: 103).

And so too for a large number of nature *haiku*, in which animals and plants are represented doing what they naturally do, with no ulterior or superimposed meaning (Stibbe 2007). In *Tonari no Totoro*, the frog appears as a frog and not a symbol of something else, croaking as frogs do rather than talking or acting unusually; the snail slithers; the butterfly flits; the leaf floats down the stream. This is nature *sonomama* (as it is), which Suzuki (1970: 230) explains is consonant with the Buddhist ideal of *tathata* (suchness).

1.4.3 The human

Whether or not nature *haiku* include explicit reference to people, there is always an implied human presence. This is because *haiku* record the poet's genuine encounters with nature. Unrecorded in Bashō's *haiku* about the frog (above), though undoubtedly present, is Bashō's ear hearing the sound of the water. Likewise, in the visual *haiku* of *Tonari no Totoro*, the viewing angle is always from the perspective a human viewer might take: a viewer standing on the bank looking at the leaf in the stream, or closely observing the movement of the snail, following the flitting of the butterfly with their eyes, or crouching down to see the frog. In this way, the film records not just nature, but the act of 'seeing' nature, and places the viewer in the role of the seer.

In several places in the film, the observers of nature are explicitly depicted as Mei and Satsuki. This is achieved by picturing the children with postures and facial expressions showing that they are intensely looking at something, and then cutting to a shot of what they are looking at. An instance of this occurs in one scene which begins with the two girls leaning over the rail of a bridge looking intently at the stream below, their eyes forming invisible vectors pointing downward. There is then a cut to a shot of some small, ordinary fish sparkling in the water below, from a high angle – the angle that the girls are looking from – which places the viewer in the position of seeing the scene through the eyes of the girls. The next cut is back to the girls, showing the reaction on their faces. The reaction is one of pleasure and delight, and so the film is showing the viewer how to look at and find delight in nature.

There are many shots in the film where delighted reactions to nature are modelled: Mei and Satsuki stare wide-eyed at an acorn which glints in the sunshine, and Satsuki says the word *donguri* (acorn); Mei looks intently at tadpoles in a pond saying the word *ojamatakushi* (a mispronunciation of *otamajakushi*, tadpole). In another scene both children stare with delight at an enormous camphor tree as it is shown from a low angle, with the view slowly panning up to the top. This depiction demonstrates to viewers in a very physical way how to look at a tree – starting with its trunk and moving upwards to the leaves and branches, and experiencing pleasure.

The girls' way of approaching the world has strong parallels with the form of ecological consciousness that Ishizawa and Fernández (2002: 21) call 'Loving the world as it is', which they contrast with Western abstraction. The key is a particular way of looking closely at nature, without which people will always be observing at a distance. As Suzuki explains:

Most people do not really know how to look at the flower; for one thing they stand away from it. ...The one who beholds is separated from the object which is beheld; there is an

impassable gap between the two and it is impossible for the beholder to come in touch inwardly with his object (1970: 353).

The girls' way of seeing becomes particularly salient through its contrast with the very different way that their father interacts with the world. The father, a university professor, clearly *knows about* the world, while the two girls actually *see* it. The girls are therefore interacting in a more Zen-like way with the world than their father; as Hagen says, 'the buddha-dharma is about *seeing*, not about believing' (Hagen 1999: 49).

At one point in the film, Satsuki in the foreground stares in wonder at the camphor tree and exclaims '*otōsan, sugoi ki*' (Father, amazing tree!). The father is busy and gives the tree only the most miniscule of glances before turning away and saying '*kusu no ki da yo*' (It's a camphor tree, you know), using the authoritative particle *yo*. He looks at an acorn that the girls find, not with their sense of wonder, but with intellectual curiosity, asking '*risu iru kanā*' (I wonder if there's a squirrel here?). When Mei and Satsuki encounter soot sprites he is quick to explain they are *makkurokurosuke*, occurring when eyes adjust to a dark place, and later he explains that the Totoro is the '*mori no nushi*' (keeper of the forest), yet he can see neither the soot sprites nor the Totoro.

The study where the father works oblivious to the wonders of a tree magically growing outside his window is full of books and papers, but there are no natural objects whatsoever. In one scene, Mei comes into his study from playing outside contentedly and places six flowers on his desk, as if prompting him to notice the natural world outside of his books. And he does, by picking up and appreciating the flower. The father, then, is deeply knowledgeable, but without Mei's help does not 'see', and so misses out on the sense of wonder that the two girls experience.

The girls' direct, intuitive approach to experiencing the world comes across clearly when a comparison is made between the way that the girls speak in the original Japanese version of the film compared to the English translations in the two dubbed versions. When Mei and Satsuki stand on the bridge and look intently at the fish, Satsuki says, '*Sakana! hora, mata hikattai*' (Fish! look, they glimmered again) in the original Japanese version. However, the Zen feeling of unity in the relationship between girls and fish is lost in the English translation of the Fox version when Mei is made to say 'What are those little things swimming around?' and Satsuki is made to answer 'I don't know. Goldfish maybe or something'. This exchange exemplifies a questioning, knowledge-based approach, rather than an intuitive approach based on a sense of wonder. There are several similar instances of this:

<i>Original Japanese</i>	<i>English translation</i>
<i>Sakana! hora, mata hikatta</i> (Fish! look, they glimmered again)	What are those little things swimming around? (Fox)
<i>Otosan, sugoi ki!</i> (Father, an amazing tree!)	Dad, what's that big tree? (Disney)
<i>Minna ni wa mienai n da wa</i> (No-one can see it)	But how come nobody can see the bus? (Fox)
<i>Obake yashiki mitai</i> (It's like a ghost house)	Do you think it's haunted? (Fox)
<i>Ki ga yoketeru</i> (The trees are parting)	But how does he make it do that? (Fox)
<i>Ki ga nai</i> (There's no tree)	What happened to the tree? (Fox)

In all these cases, the children in the Japanese version are verbalising their direct sensual experience – expressing the world *sonomama*, as it is. In the English version, however, they are abstracting away from their experience to discover underlying patterns or causes, which is closer to a Western scientific approach. As Suzuki points out:

concepts are useful in defining the truth of things, but not in making us personally acquainted with it. ...The idea that the ultimate truth of life and of things generally is to be intuitively and not conceptually grasped ... is what the Zen form of Buddhism has contributed (Suzuki 1970: 219).

The intuitive and appreciative approach to the world that the girls exemplify could be considered a manifestation of the Zen aesthetic of *wabi*. *Wabi* is often translated as ‘rusticness’ or ‘appreciation of poverty’ but can be thought of as feeling ‘inwardly the presence of something of the highest value’ (Suzuki 1970: 23) in things which are not valuable in a material or utilitarian sense: a leaf, a tadpole, a dilapidated old shrine, a rough earthen bowl. Ecologically, *wabi* is important because human needs are satisfied without the endless, and ultimately self-defeating, accumulation of shiny new possessions.

Wabi is demonstrated in the film through reaction shots showing the children’s delight in ordinary nature, and in the run-down human artefacts around them. When they first see their new house they say ‘*Ano uchi?*’ (that house?) and shout ‘*boro!*’ (run-down!), but with extreme pleasure in their voices and facial expressions. They find the wooden porch is rotten and again react with delight as they say ‘*kussatteru!*’ (it’s rotten!). Similarly, when Mei finds an old bucket she beams with happiness, saying ‘*soko nuke da!*’ (it doesn’t have a bottom!), before using it as a telescope. The Disney version entirely misses the sense of *wabi*, however, by translating *soko nuke da* (it doesn’t have a bottom) as ‘what a stupid bucket!’

In another scene, the Fox version loses the sense of *wabi* by representing pleasure in possession rather than in appreciating things as they are. When Satsuki and Mei stare intently at an acorn, Satsuki simply says ‘*donguri*’ (acorn) in the Japanese version. However, the Fox version dubs this as ‘Hey Mei, look, an acorn’ and then makes Mei respond with ‘But I want an acorn too’, despite Mei’s silence in the original. Later Mei says the single word ‘*atta*’ (there’s one), which becomes translated as ‘Oh, I have my own acorn right here.’ In this way the acorns become human property, rather than simply existing as objects of wonder in themselves.

The use of the pronoun ‘I’, and the possessive ‘my’, in ‘I have my own acorn’ suggests an egotistical concentration on self rather than on what is being observed. This is also apparent in the Fox translation of Satsuki’s comment ‘*heya no naka de donguri ga ochiteru no*’ (Acorns are falling in the room), which becomes ‘Acorns! We found them! And I found a bunch of them right near the back door’. In this case, the original Japanese makes the acorns the agent of the clause, but the English translation makes the girls refer to themselves as agents. Similarly, when the father suggests that the acorns may have been left by a mouse, Mei says ‘*risu ga ii*’ (a squirrel is better) in the original Japanese, with squirrel as the subject of the clause. The Fox version, however, makes the clause centre around Mei and her desires: ‘Yuk. But I don’t want a dumb rat’.

Indeed, the pronoun ‘I’ is used one hundred seventy-eight times in the Fox dub, but rarely are equivalent pronouns used in the original Japanese. This is partly because Japanese sentences do not require subjects to be made explicit, but also because the characters in the English version interpret the world through themselves and their desires rather than directly. If Zen ‘abhors

egoism in any form of assertion', as Suzuki claims (1970: 225), then the girls in the English version fail to achieve this Zen state of egoless absorption in the world. The girls in the Japanese version, however, come far closer to this state, exhibiting the form of ecological consciousness which deep ecologist Arne Naess once described as: 'to enmesh yourself in what you are doing, what you experience, in such a way that the relation to your ego disappears, and the Self is expanded into the World' (Naess in Loy 1998: 105).

Another form of ecological practice exhibited in the film is the way the children demonstrate the Buddhist conception of *naikan* in relationship to food. *Naikan* is reflection and resulting gratitude and appreciation for all that is sacrificed so that we can live (Jones and O'Neil 2002). In the case of food, *naikan* can lead to ecologically beneficial behaviours such as the consumption of locally produced organic food, with wastage carefully avoided (Stibbe 2005a: 255).

The children exhibit *naikan* when they discover the field where the Grandma character grows vegetables, showing their appreciation by saying '*obāchan no hatake tte takara no yama mitai*' (Grandma's field is like a mountain of treasure). Before eating tomatoes and cucumber cooled in the stream, the girls say '*itadakimasu*', a traditional Japanese phrase that indicates appreciation for the plants, which have given up their lives, and the people who went to the effort of growing them (Stibbe 2005a: 255). The food is fresh and simple and the reaction on the girls' faces is portrayed as great enjoyment. This is a particularly important scene, because other aspects of the appreciation of nature which manifest themselves in the film could be accused of being aesthetic and non-interventionist, thus glossing over the very real need of humans to interfere with nature to create food, and the ethical questions this raises.

Predictably, the Disney version loses the concept of *naikan*, by translating '*Obachan no hatake tte takara no yama mitai*' (Grandma's field is like a mountain of treasure) as 'Wow Granny, your garden is just like a market'. Even more distant from the concept of *naikan*, the Disney dub translates '*itadakimasu*' as 'On your marks, get set, go!' as if eating was a race rather than a deep appreciation of sacrifice.

Overall, the words of the human characters in the Japanese version combine with the rich depictions of the natural world to demonstrate deep connection with nature. The frequent inability of the English dubbing to capture this connection is both a loss in terms of the English version's ability to contribute to environmental education, but also a gain in the potential for using the differences in translation to highlight key differences in culture.

1.4.4 The Sacred

Shintō animism is subtly interwoven throughout the film, most significantly through the depiction of Shintō symbols surrounding one particular tree that plays an important role in the film. This enormous *kusu no ki* (camphor tree) stands next to a dilapidated Shintō shrine, and the sacredness of the tree is marked by a rice-rope and paper streamers wrapped around its trunk. The tree's sacredness is further emphasised in a scene where the girls and their father bow to it, thanking it for looking after Mei, while the father speaks of a time when humans and trees were '*naka yoshi*' (on good terms).

There are other Shintō symbols throughout the film: the truck in the first scene drives past a roadside shrine; there are paper streamers next to the Totoro inside the camphor tree; shrine gates (*torii*) are shown at the foot of a hill; there is a roadside *ojizo san* statue which the girls bow to when waiting for their father's return; Mei sits under a line of *ojizo-san* when she is lost;

a fox spirit shrine (*inari jinja*) gives Mei a chill as she looks at it. No words are spoken about the Shintō elements in the film – they are just there, blended in with nature and experienced as the children experience them. This leads analyst Helen McCarthy (1999: 122) to conclude that ‘*My Neighbour Totoro*’s plot deliberately sidelines religion in favour of nature’. Susan Napier disagrees, however, feeling that ‘Shintō’s animistic spirit clearly infiltrates the film’ (Napier 2001: 491).

Rather than ‘infiltrating’ the film, Shintō could be considered integral to the film because it is part of the spiritual geography of traditional Japan, blending in with nature in ways which make it impossible to say where religion stops and nature starts (on such boundaries, see Taylor 2007). Shintō symbols are made from natural materials and gain their meaning from their particular location in a natural setting – a rock, a waterfall, a tree, the top of a mountain. The symbols may be representations of *kami* (gods/spirits), but, again, there is no dividing line between *kami* and nature. As the eighteenth-century Shintō thinker Motōri Norinaga said, ‘*Kami* can be the Sun Goddess, the spirit of a great man, a tree, a cat, a fallen leaf’ (in Kerr 2002: 32).

Miyazaki stated that he did not conceive of *kami* as some kind of literal spirit but felt a ‘very warm appreciation for the various, very humble rural Shintō rituals that continue to this day throughout rural Japan’ (Miyazaki in Boyd and Nishimura 2004: 8). In *Tonari no Totoro* it is significant that only the children interact with *kami* in their explicit form (the *Totoros*) and in their implicit form (as elements of nature such as trees and fish). This is related to the purity of their *kokoro*, a term which encompasses both mind and heart, without a Cartesian split between them. As Boyd and Nishimura (2004: 9) explain:

Shintō understands the whole of life, including both humans and nature, as creative and life giving... [M]anifestations of this generative, vital power, [are] called *kami*, ... However, to experience the *kami* presence of any one of these aspects of nature requires an aesthetically pure and cheerful heart/mind (*kokoro*), an emotional, mental and volitional condition that is not easily attained (Boyd and Nishimura 2004: 9).

Without words about Shintō practices, what is left is the sense of sacredness of place: it is clear that those who wrapped a paper streamer around a tree or placed a shrine at the top of a mountain had some kind of respect for the place and the life that exists within the place, and the film recognizes and incorporates this intertwined sense of place and sacrality.

1.4.5 The fantastic

Yet *Tonari no Totoro* goes beyond the established religious symbols which mark sacredness of place to invent new, moving, fantastic creatures: the giant Totoro, smaller Totoros, the Catbus and the Soot Sprites. There is a complex relationship between the film’s supernatural beings and its sacred elements. The placing of Totoro within a tree surrounded by a Shintō streamer suggests that the Totoro is a form of nature-spirit or *kami*, as does the way that the Father refers to him as *mori no nushi* (keeper of the forest). However, in terms of physical form and persona, the Totoro is far removed from anything in Japanese Shintō tradition, and is separated from the Shintō aspects in the film by being drawn in the simplified style. An important consideration is whether the supernatural creatures contribute to the ecological insights of the film, or whether they are attention-grabbing elements which distract viewers away from relationships with the natural world.

Film critics use various terms to describe the fantastic/supernatural creatures who appear in *Tonari no Totoro*. Hirashima (1997) calls them ‘*seirei*’, literally spirit-ghosts, with the character ‘*rei*’ associating them with spirits of the dead. Kiridōshi (2001:39) uses the term ‘*mononoke*’, making them seem to be somewhat vengeful spirits. The term which seems most appropriate, though, is the one used by Kanō (1998), ‘*yōsei*’, meaning Faerie (literally, magical [*yō*] spirit [*sei*, in the positive sense of *seishin*, i.e., heart/mind/spirit]). The way that Ted Andrews describes Faeries shows a clear parallel to the fantastic elements of *Tonari no Totoro*:

The world still holds an ancient enchantment. It hints of journeys into unseen and unmapped domains. ... There was a time when ... [e]ach cavern and hollow tree was a doorway to another world. Humans recognized life in all things ... every blade of grass and flower had a tale to tell. Now we no longer see with a child’s or seer’s eyes (1993: 3).

Indeed, the *Totoro*’s name comes from Mei’s mispronunciation of the *troll* of Norse legend. Trolls are faeries in the original sense of wild and powerful spirits symbolising the forces of nature, from a time before the ‘fairy’ became fictionalised and trivialised. It could be argued that modern fairies are made-up characters which lead children into a brief spell of enchantment before they are pulled out into the rational adult world, literally disenchanting, by being told that fairies do not exist (Stibbe 2005c).

Tonari no Totoro could be equally accused of creating fictional fairies which lead to only a temporary sense of enchantment. However, as Kiridōshi (2001: 39) points out, the children in the film are enchanted not only by the supernatural creatures, but also by the ordinary elements in nature around them. These natural elements are represented in realistic, intricate drawings, compared to the simplified line-drawing style of the Totoros which highlights their fictional nature. Enchantment with ordinary nature, rather than fairies, is the ‘indestructible’ sense of wonder that Rachel Carson (1956: 40) believed is the most precious gift that can be given to children. The faeries in the film give a sense of enchantment, of wonder, but the ultimate message is that the enchantment is there too in ordinary nature, if one only looks.

From a Zen perspective, it is significant that the fantastic creatures do not talk and therefore cannot convey abstractions or conceptualisations but only feelings such as wonder, which can carry across into the natural settings in which they are embedded. Shimizu (1997:96) believes that ‘if Totoro conveyed meaning by speaking like a human, the relationship with Mei and Satsuki would suddenly become trivial (*tsumaranai*)’. It is also significant that the main characters in the film are children. As the marine biologist and environmentalist, Rachel Carson, suggested:

[the] child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. (Carson 1956:40)

Of all the characters, it is only the children who can see *Totoro* and the other creatures. This provides a powerful metaphor: not only are the fantastic creatures invisible to the adults, the trees and flowers and ordinary nature are invisible too, simply because the adults are so concerned with other things that they do not look. Napier points out that, ‘A young girl’s fresh and clear-eyed perception of the world is the key to *Totoro*’ (2001: 128). The film is an invitation to adults to look; to see the world through the child’s eyes and regain their lost sense of wonder.

1.5 Conclusion

This article began by noting that while mainstream environmental education may excel at imparting facts about global environmental problems, the scientific and technical language it is couched in often holds it back from encouraging close observation and appreciation of local ecosystems. There is something contradictory about using any medium, whether it is scientific language, poetry, or animation, to represent nature, when the ultimate aim is for students to learn from nature directly. The representation can never substitute for the intricate patterns of sights, smells, sounds and touch that can be experienced directly. Even if students are brought into the middle of nature on a field trip, there is still a need for them find ways of ‘seeing’ into the core of that nature, rather than questioning and measuring and abstracting away from what is in front of their eyes. As Stephen Sterling points out, in the context of sustainable education, ‘we need to ‘see’ differently if we are to know and act differently, and...we need learning experiences to facilitate this change of perspective’ (Sterling 2001: 52).

The analysis of the film *Tonari no Totoro* suggests that animation, in a way similar to *haiku*, can frame ordinary aspects of nature, using lines, colours, focus and movement to highlight their significance, and represent them from the angle of a human observer looking intently at them. Animation can therefore force the viewer into the position of crouching down to look at a frog, or looking slowly up a tree from roots to branches, guiding their eyes and modelling a way of seeing nature. Even more powerfully, animation can cut to humans looking at the scene, and portray their reaction, showing how people can receive delight and pleasure from interacting with the nature around them.

Tonari no Totoro uses these and a variety of other techniques to encourage a form of ecological consciousness closely attuned with local ecosystems, where human needs are met through participation in nature rather than material accumulation. Importantly, there is nothing ‘special’ about the nature represented in the film: what appears is not the spectacular gorges of Shikoku, the colourful and intricate temples of Nikkō, the elegantly shaped Mount Fuji, the pine islands of Matsushima, or rare animals such as bears, eagles or monkeys. Instead there are weeds along the edge of the road, common flowers such as irises and azaleas, and snails, frogs, and butterflies. The form of nature described in the film is available to most people within walking distance of their homes, even if only in a local park or a disused lot.

There are many aspects of environmental education not engaged in the film, of course. It does not mention the destruction of ecosystems and no prescriptions are offered. Yet the film does offer a model of relationships with the natural world that could help provide a basis for a better understanding of natural systems, a more caring approach to them, and a way of satisfying human needs without over-consumption.

In Japan, there are few people among the general population who are willing to participate in the meditation, austerity, and vegetarianism of formal Zen Buddhism. However, the insights of Zen reach deep into the culture through the tea ceremony, *haiku*, art, crafts and traditional architecture. Certain forms of Japanese animation have the potential to provide an additional boundary-crossing medium through which Zen’s encouragement of direct awareness of nature could revitalize aspects of traditional Japanese culture for a new generation of Japanese, as well as provide valuable perspectives for environmental education around the world. As Shinobu Price points out, ‘Those who love to watch anime, whether they know it or not, are participating in a widespread global exchange that may just have greater implications than they could ever have thought’ (Price 2001: 168).

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