

Representations of the environment in Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* : Japan's cultural landscape and the representation of disasters

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1. How are disasters represented?

The novelist Haruki Murakami commented on fictional creatures called “INKlings (*Yamikuro*)” which he depicted in his full-length novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) and in the postscript to *Underground*, a collection of interviews he conducted with victims of the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system. Murakami stated that when the sarin gas attack occurred in the subway, he recalled the “INKlings” he created in his novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. The INKlings are hideous and iniquitous creatures that live in the darkness under Tokyo, lack eyes, and eat dead flesh. They burrow through underground passages under Tokyo and build scattered nests where they live in groups. However, ordinary people are unaware of their existence. Murakami describes the level of extreme personal dread (or paranoia) that he feels about the subway sarin incident by linking it to the creatures called INKlings, which he personally created.

Although Murakami described the “personal dread” he felt in response to the attack, is it not possible to see in his comments the idea that many Japanese people are resigned to disasters? This means that Japanese people view disasters as inevitable events, or they accept them without resistance. However, the aspect of Murakami's statement that I wish to point out is that he treats even man-made disasters (wars, explosions, etc.) as nothing more than natural disasters (acts of God). I suppose that Murakami's view contrasts markedly with that of Hayao Miyazaki.

On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake with a magnitude of 9.0, which is the highest recorded in the history of domestic observations in Japan, caused terrible damage. By triggering a widespread tsunami and destroying a nuclear power plant, it claimed numerous victims, becoming the most severe disaster to occur since the modernization of Japan. Immediately after the disaster, movies dealing with earthquakes or tsunamis were cancelled or their theatrical openings were postponed one after another.

In *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* (2008), directed by Hayao Miyazaki, the heroine Ponyo happily ran around on top of the giant surging waves, so it was argued within Japan that because it was a reminder of the tsunami, some people said that should not show this movie. As a result, some television stations refrained from broadcasting this movie for over a year. Therefore, few criticisms or research reports concerning the movie, *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, have adopted a posture of dealing head on with it from the perspective of “disasters.” In this paper, I wish to confront the text of *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* to discuss it from the perspectives of “disasters” and the environment. My approach is to divide the issue into the problems of the interior (level of expression) and exterior (level of society that was

affected by the movie) of the text. I also introduce the political perspective impacted by geographical conditions the movie is set in.

2. Representation of disasters (1): Problem of the interior of the text

This movie presents the occurrence of a storm so severe that it submerges a town, but the waves are depicted as the creation of Ponyo's father, who plays a comic role similar to that of a clown character. Therefore, he appears as a humorous rather than threatening character. Portraying objects as *aspects of life* is one of characteristics of movies made by Hayao Miyazaki. Waves do not appear in the context of bringing about a man-made disaster, such as war. The heroine, Ponyo, scattered the "water of life," disrupting the balance of the ecosystems of the natural world. Regarding this point, at the risk of being misunderstood, Hayao Miyazaki's way of representing disasters appears to be a posture of accepting the marvels of nature.

It can also be stated that similarly, the Great Kanto Earthquake portrayed in *The Wind Rises* (2013), was characteristically presented as an effort to portray the marvels of nature. The reason for this is that Hayao Miyazaki seems to always depict the landscape, which is considered to be the background, as a character. Miyazaki's attitude of accepting natural disasters (acts of God) is also clearly demonstrated by the following statement:

"Our islands have been repeatedly struck by earthquakes, typhoons, and tsunamis. But we are blessed with abundant nature. I think that despite many difficulties and hardships, it is worthwhile working to make them more beautiful islands. I do not want to say anything excessively admirable, but we need not despair.¹

3. Representation of disasters (2): Descriptions of essential utilities "in an emergency"

Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea tells the story of how the baby fish, Ponyo, stole her father's magic because she wanted to become a human, which triggered a disaster that submerged the town under a great flood. However, a five-year old boy took her in, calming the global disturbance. The setting was a small coastal town and a single house on the top of a cliff. The name of the main character who lives in the house on top of the cliff is Sōsuke. Hayao Miyazaki is said to have read the complete works of Natsume Sōseki and he mentions the influence of Natsume Sōseki on this movie in a movie brochure. It states that the model for Ponyo's mother Granmanmāre, who swims face-up on surface of the sea, was John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*, which Natsume Sōseki is said to have seen while studying in London. Hayao Miyazaki also quoted from Japanese literature in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988). That is because it was based on *The Acorns and the Wildcat* by Kenji Miyazawa. Although not directly mentioned in this

¹ *Asahi Shimbun*, Morning Edition, March 28, 2011. Underlining by Yonemura.

animated film, the house that the heroines Satsuki and Mei moved to is a country home for tuberculosis patients.² This is the so-called background story. This refers to the cabin in Hanamaki City in Iwate Prefecture where Kenji Miyazawa's real younger sister Toshi Miyazawa was convalescing. Therefore, in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, what pattern can we suppose was formed in this animated movie by quotes from Sōseki's works? The name of the main character in Natsume Sōseki's *The Gate* (1910) is Sōsuke, as it is in Miyazaki's movie. However, the significance of the location where the main character is placed is remarkably different from that of Miyazaki's movie. That is because Sōsuke's house in *The Gate* is at the bottom of a cliff. Ai Maeda, a scholar of Japanese literature, has hypothesized that, "Isn't the unconsciousness of authors, and in turn unconsciousness of the times or of society, thrown into relief more in the realm of objects or of living space than in the plots and themes of novels?", and explored the relationship between space and unconsciousness in *The Gate*.³ The home where Sōsuke and his wife live is in a condition Sōseki describes as, "a cliff so steep that it pressed against the eaves that soared up from the edge of their veranda" (1) and "It was in danger of collapsing at any time" (Ibid). The adulterous couple lived quietly in hiding from society, but accompanied by the constant fear of threats such as a visit by the wife's former husband. The house at the bottom of the cliff symbolizes the way Sōsuke and his wife were living.

Looking at the state of the home of another Sōsuke who lived on the top of a cliff reveals an image far from that of danger or gloom such as that portrayed in *The Gate*. Why is this so? Undeniably, Sōsuke's mother, Lisa, says the words, "Fine, leave your wife and son up on the cliff" to her sailor husband who could not return home because he was on a voyage. In addition, a "For Sale" sign can be seen directly beside Sōsuke's house. Unless it is a country villa district, the top of a cliff facing the sea is probably not suitable for a place where people would live without a special reason. However, what I wish to focus on here is how the house was equipped with an emergency water source, a private electric-power generator, propane tanks, and other basic utilities on the evening of the typhoon. This movie was released three years before the Great East Japan Earthquake, and in that way, it seems to be prophetic. In fact, at the time of the earthquake disaster, some Japanese people needed private electric-power generators. These basic utilities are emphasized in the text of the movie to increase awareness of them through dialogues between Lisa and Sōsuke and explanations given to Ponyo. Lisa, worried about the elderly people at the Day Service Center, leaves to check up on their well-being after the storm had subsided. Young Sōsuke wishes to accompany her, but she lets him remain at home. Why would she do that? Lisa tells Sōsuke, "Our house is a lighthouse during storms," and "People in the darkness have been cheered up by our light." This shows that Sōsuke's house is stout and a source of hope during disasters.

² Hayao Miyazaki (1996). *Point of Departure 1979 to 1996*, Tokyo: Studio Ghibli.

³ Ai Maeda (1992). *Recesses of the High City: On Soseki's Gate, Literature in Urban Space*, (Collected Works of Ai Maeda, 5), Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo.

4. A flood that is not portrayed as a tragedy: From a dream of flying to a dream of walking

In this movie, a tsunami strikes Sōsuke's home and submerges the town. Looking over reviews of *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* written when it was released, there are some negative comments about the submersion of the town. One of these critics asked why Miyazaki needed to submerge the entire town, or why the townspeople were too nonchalant and took carefree attitudes toward the flood. However, when this point is interpreted from a narratological perspective, the premise that the entire town is submerged can be seen as an essential element of this movie.

Miyazaki has written that his intention in making *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* was “to move the setting of Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* to today's Japan.⁴” When considered in the context of *The Little Mermaid*, this movie can probably be positioned as one in which Hayao Miyazaki, who had formerly portrayed dreams of flying in his animated films, switched over to a dream of walking. It is, of course, clear that the theme of this movie is walking or running for two reasons: the heroine, Ponyo the fish, becoming a human child and walking shadows the story of *The Little Mermaid*, and the highlight of this movie is a scene where Ponyo runs on top of the raging waves. However, the major reason is that, as in *The Little Mermaid*, in addition to Ponyo, there are also human characters who long for legs so that they can walk freely on the land. These are the elderly people who use wheelchairs in the adult daycare center. In the first half of the movie, they wish to be able to walk again when they see Sōsuke running. In the second half, their desire is fulfilled in the submerged town. Here, the submerged town can be considered to be analogous to the underwater world of the ocean. The reason for this is that the mermaid in *The Little Mermaid* has fins and swims freely in the water; as an allegory of this, in *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, the elderly people walk freely in the submerged town. This is probably the reason for the submersion of the town, which confused many who saw the movie. In other words, it created a setting where people could walk underwater.

5. The environment and movie setting: The geopolitics of movie setting

I wish to conclude with a discussion of the exterior text: the movie setting and actual problems in contemporary Japanese society.

Considering the setting of *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* shows that in this movie, the location to specifying this setting has been clearly portrayed. However, both Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli have refrained from positively referring to it.

The movie brochure for *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* presents a sketch titled Shinura District as the map of the setting of *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. This sketch, which was made at the start of production of the movie, probably partly differs from that in the completed movie. However, the model for Shinura is now known to be Tomonoura in Fukuyama City in Hiroshima Prefecture, a place that

⁴ Miyazaki Hayao (2008) *Turning Point 1997 to 2008*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

Hayao Miyazaki visited on a Ghibli Studio company outing in 2004. According to people familiar with this place, the setting of movie closely resembles that of Tomonoura, and a signboard with the words, “2 TOMO” appears on a supermarket that Sōsuke visits. Moreover, it is said that Hayao Miyazaki rented a detached house on top of a cliff in Tomonoura for about 2 months, during which he developed his concept of this movie. However, according to newspaper reports and other news media, the City of Fukuyama balked at using the movie to attract visitors, pointing out that “Studio Ghibli have not clearly stated that the movie was set in Tomonoura,” whereas Studio Ghibli responded by stating, “If we specify the place that served as the model for the movie, it will be inconvenienced by a flood of fans.” Looking back at coverage of the movie’s release, we notice that the staff at a local NPO made remarks opposed to a construction plan in that region. Some civilians in Tomonoura wished to construct a bridge to ease traffic congestion; others did not. The staff at the NPO supposed that Fukuyama city probably wished to avoid attracting nationwide attention to its reclamation project by being the stage of Miyazaki’s movie.

Along with this article, I wish to draw attention to a *Yomiuri Shimbun* article published on October 24, 2006, about 2 years before the release of this movie. The headline read, “Fund set up by Director Miyazaki and others who wish to preserve the streets of Tomonoura.” It reported that Director Hayao Miyazaki and Director Nobuhiko Obayashi were cooperating with a local NPO to prepare to establish the Tomo-Machiya Aid fund in order to help preserve the streets of Tomonoura, which is a scenic spot on the coast of the Seto inland sea. In addition, some local people who fear for the survival of Tomonoura’s streets, which are gradually losing their former appearance, established a non-profit organization (NPO) and launched an improvement project. Hayao Miyazaki and others who heard about their efforts met and talked to members of the NPO during a visit to Tomonoura, proposed a fund to preserve the streets of the town. Hayao Miyazaki reportedly told representatives of the local NPO that, “Streets that preserve regional tradition are now gradually disappearing from Japan. Tomonoura has a long history deeply rooted in daily life, so I want to carefully preserve and pass it on to later generations.”

According to Miyazaki’s intentions reported in this 2006 *Yomiuri Shimbun* article, announcing the setting of the movie *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* would likely have been great publicity for the fund. Furthermore, there was a precedent: Hayao Miyazaki’s cooperation with Sayama Hills, which was the setting of *My Neighbor Totoro*, to support the Totoro Fund. The scenery featuring farm villages in the 1950s and 1960s presented in this movie helped provide active publicity for the Totoro’s Forest. However, the fact that he did not announce the place name, Tomonoura, while similarly portraying a specific scenery in the case of *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, is presumably a result of special circumstances of some kind.

Therefore, let us adopt the perspective of Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli to reconsider the aforementioned statement by the representative of the local NPO reported in the 2008 article: “Fukuyama city probably wished to avoid attracting nationwide attention to its reclamation project by being the stage of Miyazaki’s movie.”

Figure 1 is a photo of Tomonoura taken by the author in 2010. It includes a signboard with the words,

“Living space comes first.” As a matter of interest, the building seen in the right foreground of the photo is the Tomonoura Nursery School that is associated with the nursery school that Sōsuke attended in the movie. According to a statement made by a staff at the local tourism association during the author’s visit, some local people who supported the plan to reclaim part of the harbor and build a bridge (plan for a bypass) had spoken out. They did so because if the bypass were constructed, it would permit large vehicle traffic, reassuring the people of service by firetrucks and ambulances transporting patients to hospitals. If that is the case, calls by outside opinion leaders for the preservation of the streets of towns on the inland sea coast would probably come into conflict with the wishes of the local people who wanted the bypass. For Studio Ghibli, avoiding announcing the setting for this movie appears to be an attitude resulting from a desire to be cautious about the movie being used for political ends.



Fig.1 Priority for living area

In 2018, a decision was made to preserve the streets of Tomonoura as a cultural heritage site. However, if a giant seawall was constructed to provide protection from disasters, occasionally, scenery or the environment must unavoidably be destroyed. The Great East Japan Earthquake presented a universal theme to the world, which is the coexistence of human beings and nature, but when we turn our attention to the relationship of nature and humankind or to the environment, the animated movie *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* will continue to raise the challenge to the environment in the exterior of its text.

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