

Critically examine *Princess Mononoke* (Hiyao Miyazaki, 1997) and identify the main elements that reflect the social, cultural and political contexts in which it was made. Analyse these elements and focus on how its projections of the present and the future relate to Japanese history and its representation.

Hiyao Miyazaki first made his name with the animated feature *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984).<sup>1</sup> He was also one of the founding names behind Studio Ghibli, with Isao Takahata in 1985. They have brought Japanese animation to a global audience, introducing to a non-Japanese market their distinctive style of work in translation. The cross-cultural and mass-market success of their work owes much to the composite style of working. They mix popular forms and genre, such as: graphic novels and comic books, myth and fairytale, naturalistic and epic forms, to produce work that survives and thrives in translation. Certain meanings and nuances in the original Japanese script might be lost in subtitles and dubbing, but they are replaced by other meanings, just as significant for, say, the English-speaking market because of the universal mythic and archetypal forms used by the animators.

This is evident in *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The roots of the story are in Japanese folklore and legend and the feudal history of the country. Based for most of its history on an agricultural economy Japan's culture and society imbued mythic and supernatural properties onto the creatures and landscape, therefore rendering a view of the world strongly connected to the environment. The embodiment of spiritual power came about in the forms of animals and plants. In addition to this the ethics and sensibilities in politics and society are rooted in a fundamentally hierarchical structure, from the Emperor descending through nobility and different castes, clans and warlords.

These features endow the film with its dramatic potential and inspire the use of archetypes: setting the radical Lady Eboshi's industrial clan against the mythic gods of the forest who appear in animal form. Mediating this narrative are the characters of Prince Ashitaka and Mononoke. Ashitaka has inadvertently, thanks to his feats of bravery for his people, been infected by a toxic, creeping plague that will gradually infest his body. Mononoke is the mortal girl raised by wolves who embodies the connection between humans and the animal and natural (spiritual) world of the forest.

The message of ecological and environmental preservation and harmony is strong, and echoes that of Miyazaki's earlier work, *Nausicaa*. This message came about in the minds of artists and animators because of the drastic and cataclysmic changes to Japan's society during and after the Second World War. Japan had to change and adapt and moved more towards the now familiar industrial and technologically based economy in the 1950s and 60s. Yet, there was still that pull to the past characterised by the country's still strongly religious society and the powerful cultural imperatives and urges to associate with the mythic and archetypal forms of folklore and tradition. Many people had a rural and feudal existence until the war and it was the destruction wrought by the atomic detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1946, bringing an end to the war in the Pacific that caused the country to change its perspectives on its possible future.

Isolation, feudalism, imperialist expansion and tradition changed overnight with the defeat and the coming to terms with the aftermath of modern atomic warfare. The literal and metaphoric 'fallout' of these events are dealt with symbolically in *Princess Mononoke*. The creeping industrialism, the war waged against the gods of the forest and the toxicity and poison spread by this are what afflicts the characters. Mononoke reacts against this by siding with the forest spirits and rejecting human intervention throughout, until Ashitaka can change her mind. Ashitaka is a victim of the poison and persuades Mononoke to help him and spread the healing properties of nature. He and Mononoke (the vengeful warrior) also embody the cult of youth that pervaded Japanese society after the war.

In order to reaffirm the country's identity for the future youth became idolised, rather as it did in America of the 1950s. Mononoke and Ashitaka are the solution; barely into adolescence their vigour, strength and sexuality influence the action and subsume even the proportions and power of the forest god as he rampages in the final scenes. Ashitaka and Mononoke also teach one another the lesson of, respectively, enabling the animal and human sides of their nature to be released.

Ultimately Miyazaki's message is one of hope and resilience to learn the lessons nature and youth can teach us. His works draw upon diverse sources, such as Jonathan Swift with *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), Norse and Celtic legend and children's novels and stories. He has therefore, a powerful cross-cultural appeal and a strong aesthetic that

represents Japanese culture to the world and influences the work of other animators and film-makers.