CHAPTER 7

Environment, Technology, and Modernity in Contemporary Japanese Animation

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Abstract

The genres of science fiction, the comic strip, the graphic novel and animated film, long considered marginal to the mainstream literary canon, have now become important vehicles for environmentalist thought and art. Animated film, in particular, has evolved into a crucial medium for the representation of humans’ relationships to natural environments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. With a range of well-known animated films produced by Disney Studios as a background, this chapter focuses on Japanese animation, particularly on the works of two directors who have shaped the pathbreaking work Studio Ghibli for close to three decades: Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao. Both directors have earned a reputation for extraordinary visual inventiveness and technical virtuosity, complex characters and elaborate plots. Several of their films revolve around environmentalist issues, especially Takahata’s *Pom Poko* (1994) and Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Despite their close collaborations, Miyazaki’s and Takahata’s visions of nature, its relation to human society and the forces that endanger it differ strikingly, especially in the role nature plays in an increasingly human-dominated, urban and technologized world. More broadly, their work positions nature differently in relation to processes of modernization and postmodernization. Takahata’s *Pom Poko*, in particular, embraces Japan’s contemporary urban world and its simulated realities in both its plot and its self-reflexive technique. In general, contemporary animated films seek not so much to portray the natural world mimaetically in the way nature documentaries do, but to construct counternatures that explore alternative visions of humans and their environments.

Keywords

Over the last three decades, comic strips, graphic novels and animated films, which had long been considered pop-cultural genres on the margins of the literary and artistic canon, have graduated to mature art forms that regularly engage with serious philosophical and historical issues as well as with Western and Eastern aesthetic traditions. The emergence of the term “graphic novel” in English itself signals the transformation of a genre no longer conveniently described by the earlier concept of the “comic book” with its associations of a mostly juvenile audience, funny or fantastic and for the most part action-oriented plots, two-dimensional characters and unsophisticated visual techniques. In Japan, for example, Nakazawa Keiji’s manga 黒い雨に打たれて (Kuroi ame ni utarete; Struck by Black Rain, 1968) and はだしのゲン (Hadashi no gen; Barefoot Gen, 1973; animated film version, 1983) with their description of the bombing of Hiroshima and its aftermath, as well as Takahata Isao’s animated film 火垂るの墓 (Hotaru no haka; The Grave of the Fireflies, 1988) about the experience of three orphaned children who barely survive in the aftermath of World War II, established the comic book and animated film’s grasp of serious historical topics.

In the US, similarly, Art Spiegelman’s two-volume graphic novel Maus (1986/1991), a complex framed narrative which recounts the protagonist’s father’s experience of Third-Reich concentration camps in Auschwitz and Dachau, grappled with historical trauma in so accomplished a manner that it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. In France, Pierre-François Beauchard’s multi-volume graphic novel L’ascension du haut-mal (Epileptic, published 1996–2003 under the pseudonym David B.), achieved comparable fame through its portrayal of the protagonist growing up with his epileptic brother.

Given such examples, it is not particularly surprising that graphic novels and animated films would also have engaged with environmentalist concerns, ecological crisis, and more broadly humans’ relationship to their natural environment. Ecocriticism, the environmentally oriented subdiscipline of literary and cultural studies, has begun to address these portrayals in...