Human Animals—Transformations Devoutly to be Wished?

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Narratives involving transformations between humans and nonhuman animals are very ancient and exist in all societies. They have many functions, of course, but they seem to bear witness particularly, at the deepest level, to our sense that we both are animals and are different from other animals. This can be a disturbing, as well as vital, conception. Certainly, the two films that I will review here—*Wolf Children* and *Ponyo*—are each acutely aware of a kind of chasm that opens up when we try to imagine ourselves as equally strongly affiliated with animal and human identities. Both films were made in Japan, in the anime style that has produced so many popular masterpieces in recent years, and it is possible that their creative exploration of animal and human identities owes something to the Buddhist traditions of Japanese culture, as well as the directors’ individual interests. Both—though in different ways—raise questions about the complex forms in which we experience the relationship between animal and human identity in contemporary society.

In *Wolf Children*, the distance between human and animal is collapsed through the imaginative device of a figure that is both wolf and human, in equal measure. But there is a profound sadness—indeed loneliness—at the heart of the Wolf Man in this film. He must constantly hide and suppress the wolf half of himself in order to live in human society. His essential loneliness is what makes the courtship with the film’s main protagonist Hana so poignant at the beginning. But it is also tragic: for at the point when, quite early in the film, the Wolf Man has fathered two children with Hana, he is unable to resist his instinctual, animal nature and is killed by human beings while hunting as a wolf to feed his new family. Hana must bring up her two animal-human hybrid children on her own, and the rest of the film is taken up with exploring the dilemmas of parenting and “child” development that ensue from this in compelling, original ways.
Writer-director Mamoru Hosoda has said that he wanted to make a film about parenting, and that the wolf child device gave him a fresh angle from which to explore this much charted territory. The issue of choice—which part of our natures we allow to define us and form the center of our being as we move towards adulthood—structures the development of the narrative through a series of strong contrasts in the film. Hana’s son, Ame, elects to return to the wilderness of the mountain by the end, while his elder sister, Yuki, chooses to remain within human society, stating at one point that she has decided she is “better off” being a human.

But the wolf child element in the film is much more than a framing fantasy device. This is largely because Hosoda treats the central issue of our problematic relationship with the natural world—and animal nature in particular—seriously, subtly and insightfully throughout. On the one hand there is a kind of freshness and innocence about the way the film embodies what the environmentalist poet Gary Snyder has termed the “etiquette of freedom” which “we learn from the wild”: the cultivation of an affinity with wild nature that helps keep our inner selves in balance, enabling us adopt a more authentic, ecologically attuned stance within nature. The depiction of the children’s animal energies in their wolf mode, which climaxes in an exhilarating sequence where mother and children romp across the freshly snow-covered slopes of the remote region they inhabit, is delightful. But such scenes avoid being simply sentimental because Hosoda tempers his lyricism with a harder, realistic edge.

The children’s wolf identity makes them share their father’s existential loneliness, as much as it enables them to embody a mode of being more attuned to natural instincts and energies, for instance. Indeed, their social identity as humans is poised constantly on the edge of their hidden animalness being disclosed to others, an event that they fear would be apprehended as monstrous. As Zuki says, she wishes she could tell people the truth “like it doesn’t terrify me.” Likewise for the mother, Hana, the simple life of self-sufficiency in harmony with the natural world she adopts is shown as almost unbearably hard, much of the time, as well as beautiful.

Within these larger narrative arcs, *Wolf Children* also engages thoughtfully with a number of crucial issues associated with the way we represent and relate to animal nature in the modern world. The device of the children’s wolf identity is imbued with a distinctive emotional resonance, for instance, through emphasizing that real wolves have long been extinct in Japan. Seeking a father-figure and tutelage for his animal nature, Ame first turns to a caged wolf in the conservation park. But the script enforces recognition that the only wolves now existing in zoos and conservation areas have been bred in captivity, their own links to the wild gradually attenuating. Ame must turn to another species, a