



Miyazaki Hayao's Animism and the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The need for a reconsideration of human-nature relationships has been widely recognized in the Anthropocene. It is difficult to rethink, however, because there is a crisis of imagination that is deeply entrenched within the fundamental premises of modernity. This article explores how 'critical animism' developed by Miyazaki Hayao of Studio Ghibli can address this paucity of imagination by providing alternative ways of knowing and being. 'Critical animism' emerged from the fusion of a critique of modernity with informal cultural heritage in Japan. It is a philosophy that perceives nature as a non-dualistic combination of the life-world and the spiritual-world, while also emphasizing the significance of place. Miyazaki's critical animism challenges anthropocentrism, secularism, Eurocentrism, as well as dualism. It may be the 'perfect story' that could disrupt the existing paradigm, offering a promise to rethink human-nonhuman relationships and envisaging a new paradigm for the social sciences.

Keywords

animism, Anthropocene, climate change, human-nature relationship, Minamata, Miyazaki Hayao, Studio Ghibli

Introduction

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh (2016) contends that our inability to respond to the climate crisis in a fundamental way goes hand-in-hand with a crisis of imagination and culture, which stems from the same limitations (epistemological and ontological) that underlie modernity. In order to bring about a fundamental change, 'we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections', as Donna Haraway (2015: 160) writes.

In this article, I propose that the animism presented by Miyazaki Hayao of Studio Ghibli opens a new perspective on responding to the climate crisis and the Anthropocene. Miyazaki is acknowledged globally for his animation films, most notably *Spirited Away* (2001), which received an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2003. The global popularity of his work is unquestionable. Studio Ghibli films have been distributed worldwide through Disney since 1996 and the streaming of Ghibli films by Netflix and HBD Max in 2020 is expected to elevate the global exposure of his films even further. It could be said that Miyazaki Hayao is a cultural icon of our time.

This paper argues that Miyazaki's films provide stories and images of animism which help us not only to rethink human-nature relationships but also to open up our imagination to envisage a new direction in the paradigm of the social sciences in this age of the Anthropocene. Animism may be defined as a diverse philosophy of nature, which conceives of the spiritual world in nature as the source of universal life; and further, to foreshadow my discussion below of Miyazaki's understanding of animism, it rests upon the non-dualistic premise of the oneness of life, nature, and spirit/soul (*tamashii*).

Although there have been attempts to clarify the theoretical significance of Miyazaki's work in relation to climate change (Pan, 2020), scholarly exploration of his work from the viewpoint of animism is limited (see Jensen and Blok, 2013; Ogihara-Schuck, 2014; Thomas, 2019; Yoneyama, 2019, 2020). This might be because it is difficult to deal with animism within the existing dominant paradigm of the social sciences, as I explore in detail below. Nevertheless, Miyazaki's films are enormously popular and have a very wide appeal that transcends cultural and age barriers (Pan, 2020). By presenting animism in a way that attracts millions of people around the world, do Miyazaki's films provide a response to Ghosh's crisis of imagination and crisis of culture?

In order to explore this thesis, I address three questions: 1) What are the key features of Miyazaki Hayao's animism, which I call critical animism in this article? 2) How does his animism differ from 'classical animism' and 'new animism'? 3) What is the theoretical significance of Miyazaki's animism? By addressing these questions, I argue that there is a potential for Miyazaki's animism to interrogate and disrupt the fundamental assumptions of modernity and the social sciences, and that this enables us to start envisaging a new direction in the paradigm of the social sciences.

Miyazaki Hayao's Animism

Animism is the most important tenet of Miyazaki's signature films, including *Spirited Away*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), and *Ponyo* (2008).

The significance of animism in these films is widely recognized by researchers (e.g. Ogihara-Schuck, 2014; Jensen and Blok, 2013; Harvey, 2015; Mumcu and Yilmaz, 2018; Yoneyama, 2019, 2020), as well as by fans. Miyazaki himself states that he established his philosophy of animism in the 12 years (1982–94) he worked on the manga version of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (hereafter *Nausicaä*), an epic story of over 1000 pages, which formed the foundation of *Princess Mononoke* where the human-nature relationship is the central theme (Miyazaki, 1996: 341). In his words, he seriously believes that ‘animism will be an important philosophy for humanity in the 21st century’ (Miyazaki, 2013: 199) because it can address profound scepticism about modern civilization (Miyazaki, 2008a: 339), limitations to the materialistic aspects of human society (Miyazaki, 1996: 107), and the poor condition of the earth (Miyazaki, 2013: 232), and thus respond to changing views of the universe and the earth (Miyazaki, 2013: 314).

Miyazaki’s animism has three key components. The first is his extensive and beautiful depiction of nature endowed with agency (Miyazaki, 2008a: 90; Napier, 2018), which reflects and emphasizes the voices he gives to nature. Perhaps the most illuminative representation of this agency is the *kodama*, the numerous spirit-like beings that appear in *Princess Mononoke*. They express “‘something unseen” that exists in the forest, symbolising the spiritual-world in nature’ (Miyazaki, 1996: 359). By ‘something unseen’, Miyazaki is not referring to so-called supernatural phenomena but to *life itself* in nature (Miyazaki, 2008a: 82). To perceive in nature not only the spiritual world but also usually *unseen life* is at the core of the definition of animism, as will be discussed in the next section. Miyazaki’s animism is well articulated in the words of Nausicaä in the manga version of *Nausicaä* (Miyazaki, 2013: 199). At the end of the story, confronted with a monotheistic God-like figure, Nausicaä shouts: ‘A life is a life, regardless of how it comes into being. [...] Every life form, no matter how small, contains the outside universe within its internal universe’ (Miyazaki, 2012: vol. 2, 443); and ‘our god inhabits even a single leaf and the smallest insects’ (Miyazaki, 2012: vol. 2, 518). These lines crystallize Miyazaki’s animism based on the oneness of life, nature, and spirit/soul (*tamashii*) (Yoneyama, 2019: 159–204).

The second key component of Miyazaki’s animism derives from his position in the historical and political context of Japan, especially in relation to Shinto. Shinto is a sophisticated example of animism (Clammer, 2004: 102) where kami represent a spiritual and vitalistic force in nature. In Japan, however, ‘images of nature have played a particularly central role in moulding the imagery of nationhood’ (Morris-Suzuki, 1998: 35), and the concept of animism has been ‘widely used as a way of explaining the distinctiveness of the national culture’ and its putative superiority (Clammer, 2004: 83). As such, the discourse on animism has often had political and ideological implications

with strong jingoistic and orientalist colours (see Umehara, 1989, Yasuda, 2006, for instance, and my critique of nationalistic animism in Yoneyama, 2019: 17–28). This aspect of animism in Japan is closely linked to Shinto as a state ideology (the modern institutional aspect of Shinto). Miyazaki's 'challenge' has been how to distance himself from state animism and convey *his* animism without being misunderstood as being part of the nationalistic discourse of 'Japanese animism', so that he can 're-enchant his audiences with a sense of spirituality that eschews the dogmas and orthodoxies of organised religions and politics' (Wright, 2005: n.p.; see also Reitan, 2017).

Miyazaki's animism instead reflects what UNESCO defines as the often 'intangible cultural heritage' that exists in diverse forms of folk belief (UNESCO, n.d.). A critical element distinguishing Shinto as state ideology and Shinto as intangible cultural heritage is the significance of the local and place in the latter. As pointed out by Clammer, animism is 'intensely local' (2004: 95), as it is about the direct connection between people and the numinous power of a particular place. The distinction between the two kinds of Shinto is most sharply demonstrated by the Meiji era's 1906 Imperial Ordinance, which enforced the destruction of small village shrines to configure bigger shrines as the administrative and ideological apparatus of the modern state. Miyazaki clearly disassociates himself from ideological aspects of Shinto. He states that: 'I don't go to worship at a shrine at New Year's. It's because I can't believe that the gods are inside those gaudy shrines' (Miyazaki, 1996: 360). Thus, shrines that appear in his films are local shrines, which are humble and decoration-free, and very much a part of nature, like the one in *My Neighbour Totoro*.

The third key component of Miyazaki's animism is his negation of dualism, or critique of what Val Plumwood calls the 'hyperseparation' of Western binaries (cited in Rose, 2013: 94). What is often misunderstood as 'moral ambiguity' between 'good and evil' by Western viewers schooled in dualism actually stems from Miyazaki's negation of binaries. Thus, Miyazaki's depictions of 'good and evil' (Napier, 2006) and 'purity and pollution' (Wright, 2005) are the result of his deliberate challenge to the dualistic view of the world (see also Reinders, 2016). His negation of binaries is again best articulated by the manga version of *Nausicaä*. In this story, Miyazaki challenges all sorts of dichotomies such as human:nature, life:death, spiritual:material, poisonous:poisoned, natural:human-made, eater:eaten, seen:unseen, and light:dark. His negation of dualism confronts readers most powerfully at the end of the story when Nausicaä notices that the 'blue blood' of the Ohmu, a giant insect which, until that point, appears to represent the 'ultimate good', is actually shared by the Crypt of Shuwa, the 'ultimate evil'. Underlining this is Miyazaki's philosophy of the negation of dichotomy which he presents in the words of Ohmu – 'one in all and all in one' – and that resonate with

esoteric Zen Buddhism (Yoneyama, 2019: 183–91). Where then does Miyazaki's animism belong theoretically in relation to scholarly discourses on animism?

Classic Animism and New Animism

Miyazaki is not alone in presenting a critique of dualism, albeit indirectly through the medium of animation films. The Cartesian human-nature dichotomy has been critiqued especially since the 1990s (e.g. Haraway, 1991; Latour, 1993; Descola and Palsson, 1996), both generally in post-modern scholarship and specifically by 'new animism', academic bodies of work that surfaced around the turn of the 21st century, which postulated, *inter alia*, that 'the Enlightenment distinction between Nature and Society is obsolete' (Hornborg, 2015a: 57; see also Morrison, 2015). With ever-intensifying environmental problems and climate change, even the biblical foundation of the binary human-nature relationship was called into question by the Vatican (Pope Francis, 2015).

Rethinking the human-nature dichotomy, however, is not easy because human-nature dualism is a 'western-based cultural formation going back thousands of years' (Plumwood, 2015: 445). It sees the human as not only entirely separate from but superior to the nonhuman because human essence is thought to be 'the higher disembodied element of mind, reason, culture and soul or spirit' (Plumwood, 2015: 445). By positioning humans above the natural world, this human-nature binary justifies using the nonhuman (i.e. nature) as a mere resource for humans. Human-nature dualism is thus coupled with *anthropocentrism*.

One scholarly trend that offers a radical critique of the human-nature binary, and anthropocentrism as its corollary, is 'new animism'. It is called 'new' to differentiate it from the classic animism of Edward Tylor, who established animism as an anthropological term in 1871 in *Primitive Culture*. After surveying the literature on various kinds of animism around the world, Tylor concluded that, although there is 'endless diversity of detail', animism is essentially 'a philosophy of nature' whereby nature is seen to be pervaded with spiritual beings (or souls), which in turn are considered as the source of 'universal life' (1871: 184–5). Based on this, animism can be defined as: *a diverse philosophy of nature, which locates the spiritual world both in nature and as the source of universal life*. Miyazaki's perception that nature is pervaded with something unseen and that something unseen is life itself is congruent with this definition of animism.

Although the definition of animism has diverged little from the Tylorian definition for more than a century (Bird-David, 1999: S67), the *evaluation* of animism has changed completely in new animism. In her seminal paper "'Animism" Revisited', Nurit Bird-David (1999) presented a critique of animism by Tylor and his followers, Emile Durkheim

and Claude Levi-Strauss among others, who are widely recognized as 'founding fathers' of sociology and anthropology or, more broadly, the paradigm of the social sciences as the knowledge base for modernity. Bird-David argued that, even though Tylor, Durkheim and Levi-Strauss differed in their attitudes to indigenous knowledges, they all considered animism to be erroneous vis-a-vis European/modernist epistemology. What made animism 'primitive' in their view was its 'inability' to separate nonhuman (i.e. nature) from human, which 'allows' these categories to have ostensibly spurious commonalities, regardless of how they are referred to (e.g. 'spirit', 'soul', 'totemic parts', and 'personhood'). This interpretation of animism derives from the imposition of European epistemology upon other knowledges (i.e. *Eurocentrism*) (Bird-David, 1999).

In other words, Tylor 'locked up' animism in Cartesian dualism (as the 'primitive religion' of the 'rude savage') and analysed it through the prism of modernity. By 'locking up' animism in the realm of estranged 'primitive culture', he established animism as the antithesis of modernity. This is not surprising because modernity began with the subjugation of 'superstition' and 'magic' to be replaced with rationality and science. As pointed out by Max Weber (2020 [1918]), *disenchantment and secularism* are key to modernity. Furthermore, as Beck holds, 'Europe is the key to secularization' (2010: 20). In other words, the human-nature dichotomy and anthropocentrism as hierarchical dualisms are embedded with the notion of progress and modernity, which is culturally and historically bound to secularism and Eurocentrism. Together, they constitute the foundational tripod of the modernist social scientific paradigm: 1) anthropocentrism, 2) secularism, and 3) Eurocentrism. The 19th-century Tylorian animism is an early formulation of this dualistic articulation within the social sciences, but these are dualisms the social sciences have not yet escaped (Beck, 2010; Connell, 2007).

Advocates of new animism challenged this foundational tripod of modernist social sciences, based on the notion that 'the project of modernity is ill-conceived and dangerously performed' (Harvey, 2005: xii). In contrast to Tylorian animism, proponents of new animism critique modernity through an animist mirror in which animist epistemology's alternative ways of knowing and being are deployed to question the premises of social scientific knowledge. Depending on the frame of reference each researcher uses, different interpretations of animism are offered. Thus, animism has been taken to represent relational epistemology (Bird-David, 1999); perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 2004); different ontologies of nature (Descola, 1996); or recognition of the ability to sense the vitalistic force that is constantly on the verge of the actual or becoming (Ingold, 2006: 10). Nonetheless, the core stance of new animism seems to be recent scholars' positive embrace of an epistemology/ontology which envisages overlapping commonalities between human and nonhuman,

i.e. to create a positive animism which seeks to disrupt the human:nature dichotomy.

Although new animism has given a positive valence to animistic epistemology and ontology, it has three weaknesses that prevent it from developing into a powerful critical tool to bring about change in modernity. First, new animism is exemplified via the cases of mostly hunter-gatherer indigenous communities often farthest away from modernity, and in this very process, it has (again) enclosed animism in the space that is the antithesis of modernity which, in turn, renders it almost irrelevant in mainstream social science, let alone in everyday life in modern society. Alf Hornborg (2015b) writes: 'However much we admire the eco-cosmologies of the Nayaka, the Achuar, or the Cree, we should not expect to encounter them anywhere but in the anthropology departments, and definitely not in mainstream textbooks on ecology or sustainability' (p. 248).

Second, methodologically, new animism still has an element of Eurocentrism, through its ethnographic approach which creates the division between the observer and the observed (Fabian, 2014). The observer (who is normally an Anglophone researcher) converts the local animistic epistemology/ontology into abstract and academic terminologies, concepts and theories which have currency largely within highly specialized academic circles in the West. The voices of the indigenous peoples, or 'native informants' (Spivak, 1999), are limited to what is captured as data and presented as quotations, to construct the researcher's argument or theory. With its frame of reference and research methods, new animism still tends to 'lock up' animism as the antithesis of modernity in a dualistic manner. New animism thus does not provide a cultural frame of reference that is strong enough to address Ghosh's 'crisis of culture/imagination' alluded to earlier.

Third, reference to Asia, especially *contemporary* Asia, is seriously lacking in new animism, despite the fact that pantheistic religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism) are very relevant to animism. Mark MacWilliams (2008) for instance remarks that what is missing from Graham Harvey's *Animism* (2005) is reference to Japan. He holds that 'studying Japanese animism overcomes the author's unconscious dichotomy that is based on a hackneyed Western stereotype of the primitive and the modern, the indigenous and the Western' (p. 265). This weakness persists in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Harvey, 2015), where the reference to contemporary Asia is extremely limited. It is in this context that Miyazaki's animism is significant. It is not only that his films can provide stories and visions of animism for a global audience. When framed academically, it has the potential to fill in the gap left by new animism. This is because his animism, here called 'critical animism', is formed *from within modernity as a critique of modernity by those who actually observe animistic epistemology, ontology and practices*.¹

Critical Animism

'Critical animism' emerged 1) from the fusion of intangible cultural heritage and a critique of modernity, and 2) as a legacy of Minamata disease, a large-scale industrial pollution that surfaced in the 1950s and continued to be a major issue that caused immeasurable human, social and ecological devastation (Ui, 1992; George, 2001). Critical animism arose from a conscious embrace of animism built on a knowing critique of the modern. As will be elaborated below, it is a philosophy that ideates nature as the combination of the life-world and the spiritual-world from which all life emerges, with particular emphasis on the significance of locality/place.

More specifically, my notion of critical animism has been derived from the analysis of the life stories of Miyazaki Hayao and three other distinguished intellectuals in Japan, who have a strong association with Minamata.² I refer to their animism as 'critical' because it emanated from people who experienced problematic aspects of modernity, which caused a 'paradigm shift' in their own lives: that is, they came to realize that animism is essential for surviving modernity. In other words, an experience of *modernity is a precondition for critical animism*. Although animistic cosmology existed in pre-modern times, the *concept* did not exist in people's minds at that time (Ishimure and Tsurumi, 2002: 278). People did not need to have animism as a concept because they lived it: they were firmly part of animistic ontology. In contrast, the animism of these intellectuals arose *as a product of modernity, to reflect upon modernity, and as such was deeply 'indebted' to the modern*.

Their animism also resulted from strong self-reflexivity. In order to explore this self-reflexivity, I adopted a 'narrative' approach proposed by Jean-François Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) Lyotard maintains that: the narrative exists outside of scientific knowledge, closely related to the 'knower' (p. 7), free from the need to legitimate argumentation through proof (p. 27). It can create a new meaning that emerges from the movement against established ways of reasoning, and a new kind of knowledge that illuminates the unknown (p. 60). Although critical animism is a term I coined, it is based on an analysis of animism that Miyazaki and others explore in their own words in the context of their own lives. It is not based on the privilege of a researcher trying to represent and make sense of the world of indigenous people, as pointed out by Descola (2015: 78).

Miyazaki's animism is based on his self-reflexivity as Japanese, on his struggle to find his own identity while being critical of Japan as a nation-state. His discovery that nature, broadleaf evergreen forests in particular, encompasses part of Japan and neighbouring Asia in a common cultural zone, a way of life based on the forests, enabled Miyazaki to re-establish his identity as someone brought up in Japan not as a state but as part of a

broader cultural zone defined by nature. This realization, in turn, enabled him to reconnect to the way nature is perceived at the grassroots in Japan where animistic cosmology remained intact (Miyazaki, 1996: 357–8).³

Animism is at the core of Miyazaki's film production. He explains (1996: 110–11) that *films* do not come from his mind but exist *external to him*. He finds them, with tremendous effort, using his subconscious, until *a film* 'pops out all of a sudden'. He further explains (1996: 429–30) that he does 'not make a film', but that *a film* 'tries to become a film' by forcing him to make a film, by making him 'a slave to the film'. Miyazaki also states that this agent, *the film*, is '*something like the memory of mitochondria*' (2008b), which is akin to the memory of life from ancient times (Miyazaki, 2008a: 225).

Miyazaki's account of the presence of *films* as an independent external agency is very similar to the account of *devaru* for the Nayaka as explained by Bird-David (1999: S74). For the Nayaka, something unseen called *devaru* 'exist in the world', which make themselves apparent in an unexpected way such as 'elephant *devaru*' and 'stone *devaru*', which can be noticed by those who know how to *pay attention*. *Devaru* preserve information in the form of 'pictures more than words, motion pictures more than pictures'. The Nayaka hold communal events to let *devaru* 'perform', to make them alive, to enable them to raise 'people's awareness of their existence in-the-world' (p. S77), and to transmit it to the next generation (p. S74).

Thus, both Miyazaki and the Nayaka pay attention to this independent, external agency, a film-like entity, which tries to convey to the next generation their existence in-the-world. Instead of holding communal events, Miyazaki lets this agency, *the film*, 'perform' by animating it (i.e. making it alive) to convey animistic images and stories to a global audience, especially to the young. Miyazaki can actually explain *this animism in his own words* from the position of an individual who lives firmly in modernity. It is as if he transforms Nayakan animism from a modern animist's perspective. It is as if Miyazaki is engaged in the *modernization of animism*, to liberate animism from the confinement of the hunter-gathers' cultural zone, to let it connect to the global audience, to raise their awareness of the existence of something like 'memory of life' in-the-world, to attend to the crisis of imagination and culture.

Compared with new animist scholarship, theoretically, Miyazaki's animism presents a deeper critique of 1) human-nature dualism/anthropocentrism, 2) secularism, and 3) Eurocentrism, the 'tripod' foundations of modernity. First, as discussed earlier, it is not just the human-nature dichotomy that Miyazaki challenges: he negates dualism itself, which presents a far greater disruption to the modernist social science paradigm. Second, for Miyazaki, the unseen world is not just a spiritual world, it is a life-world which comes with a concrete entity such as *a film* = memory of life. Although this is in line with the definition of

animism, it accentuates how the animistic notion of nature goes beyond the dichotomy of spirituality vs materiality with life as a connecting entity. Third, it is not that Miyazaki's animism implies a challenge specifically to Eurocentrism. The antithesis of Eurocentrism would not be Asianism (or any other region-specific-isms). Instead, animism which is 'intensely local' and political (Clammer, 2004), is oriented towards a theory of place. Miyazaki's animism is closer to what Arif Dirlik calls a 'radical project of the place' (Dirlik, 2005). The local is seen to be openly connected with multitudes of places to constitute 'translocal alliances' (Dirlik, 2005: 53) which counter global monopolization of cultures and economy (see Yoneyama, 2019: 221 on star sands).

To sum up, Miyazaki Hayao's animism is an extension of new animism, but it has more potential than new animism to radically destabilize the foundational tripod of the modernist paradigm of social science. His critical animism rejects Anthropocentrism, negates dualism, secularism, and Eurocentrism, and is oriented towards the politics of place in order to counter hierarchical power structures. A memorable contribution of Miyazaki's animism to the critique of Western hierarchical dualism is an image of an animistic world where the life-world and spiritual-world exist as one vitalistic force.⁴ With its tremendous influence beyond academia, this image has the potential to stimulate our imagination in a new direction and construct a different paradigm that is free from the hierarchical dualisms between human and nature, material and spiritual and European and the other.

Meanwhile, the tripod assumptions remain embedded in modernity, and instead of waning, they appear to be getting stronger with the rise of the Anthropocene narrative, a powerful scientism that has become a contemporary meta-narrative (Chernilo, 2017). In the dominant Anthropocene discourse, nature is not deemed to have independent autonomy; it is considered to be something controlled by scientific and technological intervention. Nature is seen as something to be humanized and domesticated, and as such it augments anthropocentrism (Lövbrand et al., 2015). With its strong scientism, the Anthropocene meta-narrative also reinforces the secularism that arose in pursuit of science in opposition to religion during the Enlightenment. Furthermore, critical social scientists are concerned that the scientific Anthropocene discourse undermines the critical work accumulated in the social sciences as it presents humans as a monolithic category vis-a-vis nature, and thus fails to see differences and inequalities within human society (e.g. Lövbrand et al., 2015; Malm and Hornborg, 2014; Simpson, 2020). This is problematic because carbon footprints differ significantly between rich and poor countries and it is not 'fair to speak of the climate change crisis as a common "human" concern' (Braidotti, 2013: 88; Chakrabarty, 2009); and the road to the climate crisis has also been paved, historically, on unequal and exploitative social, economic, and political systems such as

slavery, colonialism, and imperialism (Malm and Hornborg, 2014; Ghosh, 2016). Presenting a neutralized view of humans without critical and political insights makes the scientism of the Anthropocene narrative a Eurocentric colonial discourse (Simpson, 2020; Ghosh, 2016: 87).

The Anthropocene meta-narrative has direct implications for the direction of social sciences as well. If, as Clive Hamilton et al. (2015: 4) argue, nature/the earth is considered as the physical (e.g. topography, energy cycles), to which social sciences ‘must come back’ from our current *less physical* concerns (e.g. economy, society, and culture), then the social sciences ‘need to be *rematerialized*’ to the new ‘techno-natural orders’. If, on the other hand, nature is seen as a manifestation of vital energy which encompasses the life-world and spiritual-world, as in animism, then the social sciences are in need of a ‘re-enchantment’. In the age of the Anthropocene, we are at a crossroad with regard to the notion of humans and nature, in such a way that also involves questions of life and spirituality.

In the search for a new direction for social scientific research, Gisli Palsson et al. (2013) conclude that ‘we must explore how Western thought traditions, hitherto heavily dependent on the dualism of nature and society, can confront their internal limits and intellectual tipping points’ (p. 11). In order to find a new direction of social sciences, it is imperative to open up to a broader set of knowledge traditions and communities (Lövbrand et al., 2015; Simpson, 2015; Ghosh, 2016). What is required is a different cultural frame of reference to stimulate our imagination into an entirely different epistemology and ontology. Otherwise, this exploration of a new paradigm may not get very far. Miyazaki’s massive popularity suggests an intuitive grasping or hunger for his animistic stance in the global audience. Is it possible that his films prepare the global audience (including social scientists) to be more attuned to the animistic epistemology and ontology, in such a way as to redress Ghosh’s crisis of imagination and culture?

Much value may be gained from bringing his critical animism into dialogue with the social sciences to move our exploration of the social scientific paradigm in a new direction. Miyazaki’s animism has the potential to radically rupture the existing paradigm of social sciences and to open new ways for the social sciences to understand and engage with the world. First, this may include not only to ‘speak for nature’ (Lövbrand et al., 2015) but to be more sensitized to *what nature is speaking to us* (Ghosh, 2016: 30). If we want to pursue the revision of the human-non-human binary in a non-hierarchical and non-dualistic manner, this is a legitimate question to ask. Second, the scientific method might also be met with listening very hard for the agent, e.g. *the film*, which is ‘something like the memory of mitochondria’. Animistic epistemology might one day join with scientific discovery. Scientists seem to agree that there is a common ancestor of all living things, including humans (Weiss et al.,

2016), and recent developments in epigenetics suggest that living creatures might be able to transmit some ‘memory of life’ to their descendants (Aristizabal et al., 2019). These examples suggest that it may be worth rethinking the relationship between humans and nature in the broader, non-anthropocentric design of the life-world. Third, political action and culture must be enriched in such a way as to connect local and diverse understandings of the world, to form Dirlik’s ‘translocal alliances’ (2005), each with a sense of belonging to the place including the nonhuman existence (Gibson-Graham, 2011) and numinous power. This attention to local ‘detail’ will expose the inequalities and damage perpetuated by Eurocentric modernism, but also provide diverse cultural frames of reference that are much needed for imagining something new.

With these possibilities, the challenge for social scientists is to make the critique both verbal and theoretical. This will entail taking animistic nature as *sui generis*. With a change in our perceptions and imagination stimulated by Miyazaki’s films, it may not be entirely improbable. After all, we did not have a concept of ‘society’ beyond individuals until Durkheim established it as *sui generis*. Miyazaki’s animation films, which push the boundaries and possibilities of being and knowing, collectively provide a ‘perfect story’ to help us respond more fundamentally to the ‘perfect storm’ created by the Anthropocene.

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Notes

1. In my book (Yoneyama, 2019) I use the term ‘postmodern animism’ rather than ‘critical animism’. As discussed more fully in the book, the term ‘postmodern animism’ signals its emergence in a critique of Japanese modernist society. This context is outlined briefly in the next section. As the term ‘postmodern’ has different implications in varying contexts, theoretical frames and disciplinary backgrounds, the term ‘critical animism’ is used in this article.
2. Minamata disease was very influential to Miyazaki and it inspired him to create the story of Nausicaä (Miyazaki and Callenbach, 1985: 342).
3. For more detailed analysis of Miyazaki’s life story see Yoneyama (2019: 159–204).
4. Some of these characteristics resonate with Rosi Braidotti’s (2013) posthumanism, although a review of the vast range of posthumanism exceeds the scope of this article.

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