

**“PUT IT BACK IN THE OCEAN. DON’T YOU REALIZE IT’LL
CAUSE A TSUNAMI?”: THE POWER OF WATA NO HARA (THE
OCEAN PLAIN) IN *GAKE NO UE NO PONYO***

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“I feel that I was searching in my subconscious with a fishing net, and I happened to catch a goldfish in my net, and that was the inspiration for starting [Ponyo].”¹

While Hayao Miyazaki’s animated film *Gake no Ue no Ponyo*² opens with a brief establishing shot of five ships on the horizon, it is the moon and its reflection on the water that dominate the frame. In this expansive scene, the ships are specks, dwarfed and put into “perspective” by the moon and the ocean, two traditionally feminine personifications of nature. From this point, the film becomes, as Susan Bye identifies, “a visual paean to the beauty and fecundity of the sea – the deep sea, which is beyond the reach of destructive humans.”³ In this remarkable twenty-minute overture, a kind of oceanic fantasia unfolds. There is no dialogue, humans are not introduced: it is a celebration of nature in its purest, almost primordial form.

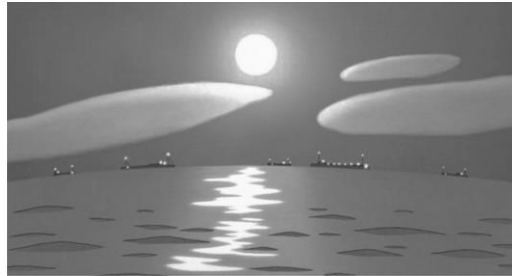


Figure 1. Opening scene from *Ponyo*

¹ Todd Brown, “Hayao Miyazaki Talks PONYO!” ScreenAnarchy, July 31, 2009 (accessed May 29, 2017, <http://screenanarchy.com/2009/07/hayao-miyazaki-talks-ponyo.html>).

² Hereby referred to as “*Ponyo*.”

³ Susan Bye, “Two Worlds Colliding: Restoring Balance in Hayao Miyazaki’s ‘Ponyo’” *Screen Education* 71 (2013), 103.

The depths and levels of the ocean are carefully delineated as the viewer's gaze is submerged and a visual journey from the moonlit surface of the water to the seabed is orchestrated. This emphasis on the moon and water introduces not only the beauty of nature, but also its power. It is significant that the light from the moon is far stronger than the tiny electric lights on the ships. In addition to this, the ocean clearly controls the ships' movements with the intensity of its waves in combination with the moon's pull of the tide. This is demonstrated in its most extreme form when the ships become useless wrecks during the tsunami. As Mark Schilling identifies, "Nature for Miyazaki is also about power."⁴ Indeed, the two are inextricably linked in *Ponyo*. Therefore, it is important that humans are only seen on the water's surface: they are superficial surface dwellers.

This prominence of the levels of the ocean introduces the narrative structure of *Ponyo* and evokes the *Watatsumi Sanjin* or Three *Watatsumi* gods ruling the upper (*uwa watatsumi*), middle (*naka watatsumi*) and lower (*soko watatsumi*) seas. Motohisa Yamakage states, "The presence of such names suggests a continuing awareness of the ocean's existence at different levels, or hidden depths"⁵ The upper sea is filled with balletic jellyfish and darting minnows. Large, transparent diamonds represent the underside of the waves and the moon's golden light is reflected at the top of the frame, through these rhombus tessellations. In essence, the graceful downward movement is reminiscent of a diver's slow descent. While this could be read in psychoanalytic terms as a journey into the unconscious, this study will argue that in *Ponyo*, the descent to the ocean bed is a reminder of the Shinto religion and the ways in which, as Eugene F. Gorski argues, "[t]he beliefs and ways of thinking of Shinto are deep in the subconscious fabric of Japanese society."⁶ Miyazaki's appeal to Shintoism in the film endorses the purity and primacy of the ocean and the transience of a disrespectful, polluting human

⁴ Mark Schilling, "Gake no Ue no Ponyo: It's Kids' Play for Anime King," *The Japan Times*, July 11, 2008 (accessed May 29, 2017, <http://www.japan-times.co.jp/culture/2008/07/11/films/film-reviews/gake-no-ue-no-ponyo/#VKzmMlvB5UR>).

⁵ Motohisa Yamakage, trans., *The Essence of Shinto: Japan's Spiritual Heart*, eds. Mineko S. Gillespie, Yoshitsugu Komuro, Gerald L. Gillespie, Paul de Leeuw and Aidan Rankin (Tokyo, New York and London: Kodansha International, 2006), 93.

⁶ Eugene F. Gorski, *Theology of Religions: A Sourcebook for Interreligious Study* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2008), 166.

race. In *Ponyo*, many of the mortals abuse nature and Miyazaki specifically identifies this abuse as, “marine pollution, overfishing and prowling submarines.”⁷

Accordingly, the opening scene is devoid of humans and pollution. At the midpoint of the ocean’s depths, eels, a black and yellow water snake, hermit crabs, anemones, and plant life complete the picture of marine life. It is an idyllic and harmonious picture and yet a lively and purposeful one. The energy is clearest in this midpoint as the complexity of movement “observ[es] rhythm, and energy.”⁸ A groper and red squid are highlighted as they traverse this level of the ocean and they draw the viewer deeper, to focus attention on the magic that is occurring on the ocean bed. Miyazaki emphasizes in his introduction to the film story of *Ponyo* that it is “a world where magic and alchemy are accepted as part of the ordinary”⁹ in an appeal to magical realism. As Linda Edwards states, “A kami evokes feelings of awe or reverence. People owe gratitude to the kami and to their ancestors for life itself and for their ever-present love.”¹⁰ Miyazaki pays tribute to *watatsumi* in his representation of the “ocean as a living presence.”¹¹ The sea kami requires respect, reverence, and even deference from the humans in *Ponyo*.

In the lower sea, a submersible vessel (named *Ubazame-go*, or Basking Shark) forms a kind of *tori*; a welcoming picture for the viewer. An arc of white jellyfish curve around the ship in a crescent moon shape and a huge rainbow water sphere emanates from the ship’s prow. In many ways, this is a deep-sea replica of the establishing shot. The ship, crescent moon, and the yellow light, mirror the moonlight and fishing ships on the ocean’s

⁷ Hayao Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008* (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2014), 426. Miyazaki has said, “I do not believe in Shinto but I do respect it, and I feel that the animism origin of Shinto is rooted deep within me,” Robert Epstein, “Spirits, gods and pastel paints: The weird world of master animator Hayao Miyazaki,” *The Independent*, January 31, 2010 (accessed July 31, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/spirit-s-gods-and-pastel-paints-the-weird-world-of-master-animator-hayao-miyazaki-1880974.html>).

⁸ David A. Ross, “Musings on Miyazaki: Early and Late,” *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 32 (2010), 172.

⁹ Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008*, 11.

¹⁰ Linda Edwards, *A Brief Guide to Beliefs: Ideas, Theologies, Mysteries, and Movements* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 232.

¹¹ Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008*, 11.

surface. The camera zooms in on the vessel before cutting away to a shot of White Sea organisms against a yellow and green background. The color suggests that these organisms are inside the iridescent bubble the human sea wizard Fujimoto has created with his spells.



Figure 2. Fujimoto and the *Ubazame-go*

However, as Fujimoto has renounced his humanity, this is still a place untouched by (and inaccessible to) humans. Everything is in flux from this point. Tiny organisms triple in size with a “pop” and move through the water; it feels “alive and organic.”¹² The use of 170,000-animation cels ensures that this opening scene is rich with color and movement. There is incredible beauty and a great sense of purpose as “schools of jellyfish undulate in the underwater turbulence.”¹³ Yet, despite this industriousness beneath the waves, Miyazaki’s 2D hand drawing (which he returned to specifically for *Ponyo*), ensures that the purity and innocence of the ocean and marine life is underlined. Manohla Dargis points out that, “Under the ocean the colors are more saturated and the lines often sharper.”¹⁴ Indeed, many scholars have argued, in line with Miyazaki himself, that the sea is a “principal character” in *Ponyo*, “not just a background in this film, but a living creature.”¹⁵ This is emphasised in his book, *Turning Point, 1997-2008*,

¹² Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The Films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata* (Harpenden: Kamera Books, 2009), 135.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Manohla Dargis, “Forces of Nature, Including Children,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2009 (accessed May 29, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/movies/14ponyo.html?_r=0).

¹⁵ Eija Niskanen, ed., *Imaginary Japan: Japanese Fantasy in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Turku: International Institute for Popular Culture, 2010), 19.

where Miyazaki underlines this decision for the *wata no hara* to take centre stage:

The sea below, like our subconscious mind, intersects with the wave-topped surface above. By distorting normal space and contorting normal shapes, the sea is animated not as a backdrop to the story but one of its principal characters.¹⁶

This is substantiated by his choice to hand draw the ocean just as he would the human characters, rather than using CGI enhancements. Miyazaki's emphasis on the link between the ocean's depths and its surface is most obvious when humans pollute the ocean in the film. The surface of the ocean and the ocean bed are inextricably connected; the detritus in the subconscious to which Miyazaki refers represents impurities that are retrievable by the conscious mind. By this, he suggests that humans subconsciously know that polluting the ocean is wrong and *Ponyo* illustrates that what happens below the waves has a direct effect on those who live above it.

Named after a character in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*,¹⁷ Fujimoto, the androgynous sea wizard, lives in a fortress in the ocean and witnesses the beauty of the *soko watatsumi*. Once a human, he is only able to live under the ocean after he renounces the human world. This makes Fujimoto a liminal or amphibious character because, as Bye argues, "Fujimoto is a character without an organic connection to the land or sea."¹⁸ While he can survive in both the ocean and on temporarily on land (with the help of a shower-like apparatus of seawater, ironically confused as weed killer by Lisa, Sōsuke's mother), he is between species. He despises his own race and "blames humans for polluting the world's oceans,"¹⁹ and yet he is not marine. Indeed, he often witnesses rather than participates in under water life. A reclusive character some critics have identified as "misanthropic"²⁰ or

¹⁶ Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008*, 419.

¹⁷ "A Report & Review of Miyazaki Hayao and *Ponyo* at Venice Film Festival," GhibliWorld.com (accessed July 31, 2017, <http://archive.is/Ed0Mp>).

¹⁸ Bye, "Two Worlds Colliding," 106.

¹⁹ Dana Stevens, "Ponyo," Slate, August 12, 2009 (accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2009/08/ponyo.html>).

²⁰ Ibid.

“stern and philanthropic,”²¹ Fujimoto is said to “reflect Miyazaki’s own environmental concerns,”²² as it has been theorized that he is Miyazaki’s “self-portrait”²³ based on his statement: “we need courtesy toward water, mountains and air in addition to living things. We should not ask courtesy from these things but we ourselves should give courtesy to them instead.”²⁴ Yet, whether or not Fujimoto is Miyazaki’s doppelganger, it is clear that he invests some of the most important statements about the environment in this character. Perhaps the most vitriolic statement occurs when, distressed by the pollution in the sea, Fujimoto curses humankind for “spoil[ing] the sea, treating [his] home like their empty black souls.” Despite his strong words, as Matthew Hester and James Cooper point out, “Miyazaki repudiates this ‘culture of violence’ altogether, commenting on bestial gentility by limiting his depiction of aggressive actions.”²⁵ This is supported by Dargis who argues that Fujimoto “gently curses the human world and its harmful ways.”²⁶ However, this interpretation depends on an analysis of Fujimoto’s magic in *Ponyo*.

When the viewer is first introduced to Fujimoto, he is casting spells in an iridescent water sphere. Dargis’ interpretation is that Fujimoto “releases potions that restore the health of the pollution-choked waters.”²⁷ However, this interpretation of Fujimoto’s use of elixirs to keep the ocean in balance is troublesome because it does not take into consideration Fujimoto’s ultimate plan for this magic. Bye and other scholars have pointed to something darker, which emanates from Fujimoto’s belief in his responsibility to defend the *wata no hara*:

Fujimoto is extremely conscious of his responsibility for the future of the planet – to maintain the balance of nature. “I must keep the sea in balance; it is a great responsibility”... he rejects humans and human existence,

²¹ Ross, “Musings on Miyazaki: Early and Late,” 172.

²² Kevin Lally, “Ponyo,” *Film Journal International* 112 (2009), 39.

²³ Dargis, “Forces of Nature, Including Children.”

²⁴ Stevens, “Ponyo.”

²⁵ Matthew Hester and James Cooper, “No Fighting in the Sea: *Ponyo* on Violence in American Culture,” *Stellar Research Journal* 8 (2014), 65.

²⁶ Dargis, “Forces of Nature, Including Children.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*

and is working towards creating a return to the Cambrian age and “an end to those abominable humans.”²⁹

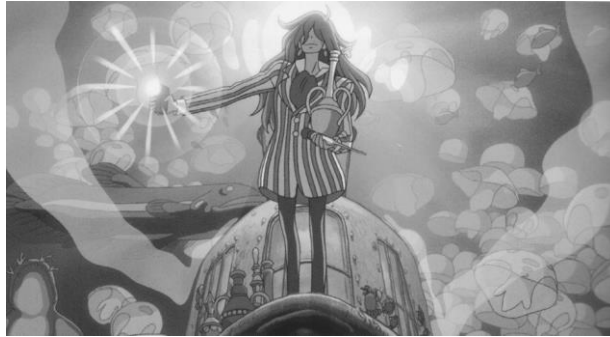


Figure 3. Fujimoto casting spells

Fujimoto is planning to annihilate the human race with his Water of Life and other potions. When Ponyo, his daughter, transgresses the vault, the precious store of magical elixirs is emptied into the ocean. The power from this swirling well of spells creates the tsunami which ultimately thrusts Ponyo above the surface of the ocean and endangers human existence.

Fujimoto is first seen using an eyedropper to drop liquid from a gold bottle into the ocean below; the blue water initially changes to gold when the potion makes contact with it. This “yellow” magic is mirrored in the full moon effect, when the light from the shipwreck’s porthole illuminates the floating organisms in the previous shot. It is a reminder of the ships floating on the surface of the water in the opening scene and the depths below, to which they are not privy. Fujimoto is at the centre of his opalescent magic bubble. His feminine red hair has been likened to “octopus tentacles,” demonstrating his “affinity with much of the life under the sea,” but they also reference the way in which Shinto has long revered the female element.³³ Fujimoto’s hair resembles his wife, Granmamare’s, in color and texture. Perhaps, given that Fujimoto has lived in the ocean for most of his life, he is feminized by this element. However, while he is surrounded by, and may have an “affinity with” a variety of marine life, the concept that he could be

²⁹ Bye, “Two Worlds Colliding,” 106.

³³ Dargis, “Forces of Nature, Including Children.”

an “environmentalist father”³⁴ is debatable, given that he tries to alter the way of the ocean. He is not an *Owatatsumi kami* in the same way that Granmamare can be read as a spirit of the ocean. Therefore, his magic is an artificial attempt to control nature. This is most evident when a grey squid moves towards Fujimoto and he uses a torch of magic light to send it a message of its unwelcomeness. The effects of the magic torch are seen when, in a slapstick moment, after he encircles himself with the rainbow light, he looks into the torch and is stunned for a moment.

Fujimoto is not only playing with the tonic of the ocean in a bid to control it, he is not allowing the survival of the fittest and the hierarchy of marine life to be given full expression. Yet, his intention to eliminate the human race in order to end their “polluting ways”³⁵ is murderous. However, it is clear that Fujimoto believes the only way to restore balance and harmony between humans and nature is to start again: to go back to the Devonian Period (the Age of Fish). This is based on his belief that when humans pollute, they do not hold nature sacred. In a Shinto interpretation, this means humans are not close to the kami and therefore, in Fujimoto’s interpretation, they are expendable. By eliminating humans’ polluting ways and reverting to the Devonian era, Fujimoto believes he is cleansing the world and reinstating purity. As Colin Odell argues, “[c]losely linked to the Shinto ethic is the way in which our environment is a living collection of interconnected beings that should be respected. Earth is often portrayed as suffering as a result of human ignorance,”³⁶ with Ponyo somehow representing the end of this uncleanness and ignorance.

First appearing through one of the lunar shaped portholes of Fujimoto’s ship with her fingerling sisters, Ponyo escapes by going behind her father’s back. Her deceit is presented as more mischievous than harmful, as the adventurous spirit of a child (or mer-child, at this point in the narrative). Her curiosity is transparent, as Miyazaki construes the water fish to be “gelatinous creatures of physical variability made of the sea, jelly and agar.”³⁷ Their shape shifting allows Ponyo a safe, graceful journey to the surface as she rides inside a small jellyfish, which then piggybacks on a larger jellyfish with enough power to journey to the water’s surface. The viewer is

³⁴ Stevens, “Ponyo.”

³⁵ Ross, “Musings on Miyazaki: Early and Late,” 172.

³⁶ Odell and Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli: The Films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata*, 20.

³⁷ Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008*, 438.

taken back through the *soko*, *uwa* and *naka watatsumi* to the moonlit rhombus tessellations, representing the waves. In the upper sea, Ponyo falls asleep. Like a child looking up at the stars in the night sky, she rolls onto her back to gaze at the fast approaching surface of the water and the shafts of light streaming through the upper ocean. She peeks out from underneath the jellyfish and smiles, wiggling back inside to take a nap; it is an incredibly peaceful moment and leads into the title sequence. The rawness of the naïve line drawings and childlike voices in the eponymous theme song are an extension of this innocence under the ocean; hence, this points to the suggestion that it is children who are the hope for the future of environmentalism. This simplicity is important because it makes the pollution, when it is illustrated, more pronounced. Indeed, Anya Clarissa Benson argues, “Seeing an ocean strewn with litter is remarkable not because viewers have never before seen litter in an ocean, but because oceans in Ghibli movies are pure, clear blue waters untainted by any human mark.”³⁸ In this way, the pollution depicted as choking the ocean and marine life is even more significant when, as Miyazaki has stated, the ocean is defined as a principal character in the film.

The sleeping image of Ponyo under a jellyfish is juxtaposed with a busy harbour of fishing ships on the ocean’s surface. The contrast between life above and below the sea is stark. While the establishing shot of the fishing town based on the traditional village of *Tomo no Ura* is initially picturesque,³⁹ it becomes clear that ships dominate the lifestyle in this place and that humans are overfishing the waters. The ocean’s surface is congested as ships busily move across the water; there is recklessness in their movements. Ponyo’s expedition is presented as a journey from innocence to experience. Her sleep is disturbed first by a speeding ship’s hull and its propeller, which almost decapitates her. Then her first glimpse of Sōsuke, a human boy living close to the ocean, is interrupted by another oncoming vessel, this time dredging the ocean bed. Ponyo must leave the serenity of the jellyfish to join other fishes swimming for their lives.

The underwater shot that follows is distinctive in its use of an unappealing shade of grey. The huge dredge net is filled with debris and refuse, the result of humans dumping their waste in the ocean. Already, as

³⁸ Anya Clarissa Benson, “Entering Ever-expanding Worlds: Constructions of Place and Time in Contemporary Japanese Children’s Cinema,” (Ph.D. diss., University of York, 2013), 188.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57–180.

Bye argues, “For viewers, the contrast between the pristine underworld of the sea, teeming with life, colour and movement, and the filth of the world inhabited by humans is undeniable: the environmental message is clear.”⁴⁰ However, Miyazaki has created more than just an environmental allegory. Dana Stevens argues, “part environmental message movie...part ecological fable, its message goes way beyond “Don’t litter, kids.”⁴¹ Indeed, Miyazaki is making an important statement about respect, purity and the importance of the interconnectedness of all creatures. By polluting the ocean and overfishing its depths, humans demonstrate a selfish disregard for the *wata no hara* and its inhabitants. By extension, the *Watatsumi* can use floods or tsunami to affect the land as “it was anciently believed that if the sea *kami* were angered, it would bring high winds and disturb the activity of fishing, but if properly placated, it would assure fishermen safe passage for their boats, and bountiful catches of fish.”⁴² This mirrors the events in the film.

Ponyo is trapped in the net full of dirt and waste that is being dredged up from the seabed. It is here that she is caught in a discarded jam jar along with other fish buried in the debris. As Bye argues, these shots “mark the dark underside of human civilisation.”⁴³ Still, humans’ rapid consumption and accompanying waste is presented as disgusting: a variety of useless objects including empty bottles, buckets, cans, tyres, a toothpaste tube, a box, star oil, a bowl, crates, a golf ball and even a pressure cooker are caught in the dredge net. As Benson argues, “litter in the ocean present[s] danger to Ponyo and other fish”⁴⁴ and Miyazaki illustrates this danger in the speed of the dredge net and by initially maiming Ponyo with the jar. These human objects do not belong in the sea and their destructive quality threatens the *wata no hara*. In this way, Miyazaki demonstrates his belief that “[h]umans...maltreat fish or creatures of the sea”⁴⁵ with their carelessness and selfishness in these early scenes. The only exception is Sōsuke, who saves Ponyo from a terrible fate. The other fish caught in the dredge net are presumably not so lucky.

⁴⁰ Bye, “Two Worlds Colliding,” 103.

⁴¹ Stevens, “Ponyo.”

⁴² “Uminokami,” Encyclopedia of Shinto, March 13, 2005 (accessed May 29, 2017, <http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=232>).

⁴³ Bye, “Two Worlds Colliding,” 103.

⁴⁴ Benson, “Entering Ever-expanding Worlds,” 187.

⁴⁵ Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 108.



Figure 4. Sōsuke rescuing Ponyo

A product of his fishing village and the son of the captain of a domestic cargo ship, Sōsuke initially worships the replica ship he carries. Indeed, later in the film it is the ship that grows with Ponyo's magic and takes them to the Sunflower Senior Daycare Centre, after the tsunami. However, in these early scenes he is quick to set it aside in order to save Ponyo and liberate her from her glass prison. This demonstrates the way in which Miyazaki uses Sōsuke to represent hope for the future of the human race. When Sōsuke takes her from the ocean, the viewer is introduced to the first of a series of anthropomorphic waves with "thresher shark eyes."⁴⁶ Initially menacing, they retreat as the waves recede with natural undulation. Furthermore, as Sōsuke's house is far above the ocean on the crest of a hill, it is out of the reach of these waves. Even after the tsunami, the house is spared from flooding because of its position on the horizon and becomes an island. Fujimoto is described as exploiting these waves; they are summoned to do his bidding and then "washed away in the water when their use is done."⁴⁷ This narrative of exploitation in Miyazaki's animation is marked by what Helen McCarthy identifies as the way "the small continuously fight against the oppression of the large."⁴⁸ In *Gake no Ue no Ponyo*, the *wata no hara* is being destroyed by "human selfishness,"⁴⁹ and it is only Sōsuke who

⁴⁶ Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation: Films, Themes, Artistry* (California: Stone Bridge Press, 1999), 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 41.

can offer hope for the future of humankind through his deep reverence for nature. In addition to this, Ponyo and Sōsuke reinscribe the importance of the Shinto animist tradition with their mutual purity and respect for one another. However, it is only after the two children are united that *Unimokami's* anger is assuaged.

The tsunami is the single most effective way to purge the ocean of pollution and cleanse the land and humankind while simultaneously bringing Ponyo and Sōsuke together. After Ponyo successfully escapes Fujimoto's aquarium-like water globe prison for a second time with the assistance of her sisters, a storm erupts. It is almost an organic reversal of the scene where she journeys to the *uwa watatsumi*. Ponyo allows a deluge of carp through a gelatinous porthole, a material that appears to be similar to the transparent jellyfish. The carp flood the fortress and propel Ponyo through the water toward Fujimoto's vault. The deep rich blue of the fish is prioritized and overwrites earlier images of the grey dirt and pollution, while Fujimoto's bright urns, elixirs, and books stand in place of the discarded bottles and cans. Ponyo is caught in the torrent but, in this scene, it is exhilarating. Giant carp hurtle towards the viewer like a tidal wave. As water and fish flood the rooms in the fortress, the colors in the frame change to a more grey-blue, while horizontal lines appear across the screen to suggest an underwater perspective. Ponyo's newly formed stick-like feet seem to land on the viewer from above, as the current draws her deeper into the frame. All of this, including the emphasis on forceful downward movement with the carp and Ponyo traveling down a flight of stairs, suggests the importance of reverting to an earlier time; a philosophy that Fujimoto expounds throughout the animation when he refers to the Devonian era.

When Ponyo transgresses the vault, the ocean mixes with the Water of Life in the well and a magical tempest begins, turning the vault into a cauldron of brilliant gold. A shiny bubble of molten gold erupts from the well and like the myth of Midas, everything it touches turns to gold. Ponyo explodes from the fortress riding on the back of golden carp and her sisters anthropomorphise into giant fish and act as waves in the tsunami. The ships on the surface of the water are tossed around like toys, reminiscent of Sōsuke's toy ship. In a nod to the origins of her Wagnerian namesake, Ponyo, as Brünnhilde, flies toward Sōsuke on the "crest of a tsunami, amid towering walls of Hokusai waves."⁵⁰ Comparing this to a pseudo-Götterdämmerung score composed by Hisaishi Jo, Bye argues that "[t]he rhythmical sound of

⁵⁰ Ross, "Musings on Miyazaki: Early and Late," 172.

[Ponyo's] feet tapping on the waves – *Splat! Splat! Splat!* – operates in counterpoint to the thundering orchestral score accompanying the movement of the waves."⁵¹ In this way, the portentous score is undercut by the innocent laughter (and foot slapping) of a child. In fact, Ponyo's escape from Fujimoto is read by critics as "a giddy, touchingly resonant image of freedom – the animated girl is as liberated from shoes as from the laws of nature,"⁵² and as the personification of "nature unbound."⁵³

However, while Ponyo may be laughing and celebrating her newfound freedom, this moment is ultimately a moment of destruction. Houses are being demolished, ships are in danger of capsizing and humans must prepare for an end to life as they know it. It is significant that for these kinds of key scenes Miyazaki "brings together a large number of cels depicting the movement"⁵⁴ as it emphasises the grand scale of this natural disaster. The "Medusa of *Gake no Ue no Ponyo*'s social message"⁵⁵ is not, as David A. Ross argues, a host of unanswered questions. Rather, it is the sobering reminder of humankind's mortality. This is most evident when Miyazaki's "Greek chorus of crones,"⁵⁶ the seniors in the Sunflower Daycare Centre, are first introduced to Ponyo. When Ponyo squirts water in one of their faces, the elderly woman cries: "Hurry up, put it back in the ocean. Don't you realize it'll cause a tsunami? Fish with faces who come out of the sea cause tsunamis—that's what they always say." Indeed, she is correct and as Ponyo refuses to return to the ocean, the ocean must go to her. As the streets are flooded, houses are submerged under water, and fish swim down roads once traversed by cars. Miyazaki suggests that the storm, tsunami, and flood function as a "cleansing regeneration that is connected with and reinforces the power of nature."⁵⁷ The pollution, both literal and metaphorical, is washed away. The ocean dominates the frame and people are compelled to co-habit with prehistoric fish. In this way, the humans appear transient and dwarfed by the magnitude of water in the frame; they are at the mercy of the ocean.

⁵¹ Bye, "Two Worlds Colliding," 103.

⁵² Dargis, "Forces of Nature, Including Children."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Niskanen, *Imaginary Japan*, 18.

⁵⁵ Ross, "Musings on Miyazaki," 173.

⁵⁶ Stevens, "Ponyo."

⁵⁷ Bye, "Two Worlds Colliding," 107.

As Benson argues, these scenes “seek... to re-create a ‘purified’ ancient time... a time that has literally washed away all the corruptions of the present.”⁵⁸ The emphasis on looking back to ancient times with references to the Devonian Period, prehistoric fish, and Fujimoto’s need to “revert,” reveals dissatisfaction with humankind and preference for a time before they polluted the earth. This is not a vengeful or vindictive desire for genocide, it is a reflection of the Shintoist belief that, “[n]ature does not consider humans to be the most important thing; the kami (the spirits) are the most important. In Shintoism, people are here by the grace of gods, but are not their main concern. Natural disasters occur because this is just how nature is.”⁵⁹

The foreshadowing of the tsunami in *Ponyo* is sobering in light of the 3/11 Japanese tsunami. Indeed, this was Miyazaki’s last animation before this event and suggests a sensitivity and perhaps prophetic sensibility towards Japan and natural disasters. In line with Shintoism, Miyazaki discusses the way in which natural disasters in Japan are not considered diabolical:

There are many typhoons and earthquakes in Japan. There is no point in portraying these natural disasters as evil events. They are one of the givens in the world in which we live. I am always moved when I visit Venice to see that in this city which is sinking into the sea, people carry on living regardless. It is one of the givens of their life. In the same way people in Japan have a different perception of natural disasters.⁶¹

Miyazaki emphasizes that natural disasters are a reminder that nature is more powerful than humankind. Benson takes this a step further by arguing that “in some ways [*Gake no Ue no Ponyo*] almost seems to celebrate the disaster; it is not solely a negative thing, or even a negative thing that holds a strange

⁵⁸ Benson, “Entering Ever-expanding Worlds,” 191.

⁵⁹ David Harris, “The Impact of Cultural and Religious Influences During Natural Disasters,” Earthquake-Report.com, September 27, 2012 (accessed May 29, 2017, <http://earthquake-report.com/2012/09/27/the-impact-of-cultural-and-religious-influences-during-natural-disasters-volcano-eruptions/>).

⁶¹ Thomas Sotinel, “Japan’s Fantasy Films Act as a Buffer against the Reality of the Natural World,” The Guardian, March 29, 2011 (accessed May 29, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/mar/29/japan-animation-natural-disaster-sotinel>).

fascination. It is not clearly ‘negative’ at all.”⁶² It is important to note that no one is hurt in the tsunami or flood. In fact, the elderly people in the nursing home are cured of their ailments and leave their wheelchairs to run unencumbered in a return to childhood of sorts. In this way, the power of nature is asserted not just in the intensity of the tsunami, but also in its restorative ability.

Miyazaki points out that this view of natural disaster is not just a quirk of the Japanese, or, specifically, Shinto. His reference to Venice is particularly interesting, given that after the tsunami in *Ponyo*, the coastal fishing village looks Venetian with people traveling in boats from one place to another. The *wata no hara* dominates what was once land but no one looks particularly distressed or upset, perhaps as the destruction of houses and property is implied rather than shown. Benson points out, “the benevolent destruction of Japan, [is] rendered as more of a pastel wonderland than a terrifying apocalypse.”⁶³ This pure sense of wonder is most evident after the flood when, from a toy ship, Ponyo and Sōsuke point out the fish that are cohabiting with them: “Oh, prehistoric fish! That one is from the Devonian era. Oh wow, it’s a *Bothriolepis*!” The scene is reminiscent of the opening scene, except that this time the tessellations on the water’s surface are the waves created by Sōsuke’s toy boat, and the *soko watatsumi* is composed of a highway of primordial fish who seem to obey road rules in the way they stay on the appropriate side of the road as they swim from one place to another. There is a sense of adventure, rather than fear, that what was once the land is now part of the *wata no hara*.

After the 3/11 tsunami, critic Susan Napier was “draw[n] back to *Ponyo* to explore its unsettlingly tranquil prediction of overwhelming disaster.”⁶⁴ Many critics keen to emphasise the “gentle” aspects of the flood discuss the orderly and peaceful way in which the victims make their way, in boats, to a local hotel. This calmness and serenity is evident in the way the people are full of goodwill and positivity as they float down highways, now inhabited by prehistoric fish and jellyfish. What’s more, Bye refers to it as a “magical tsunami that cleanses the town and the people who live there.”⁶⁵

⁶² Benson, “Entering Ever-expanding Worlds,” 189.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 189.

⁶⁴ Bye, “Two Worlds Colliding,” 105.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 107.

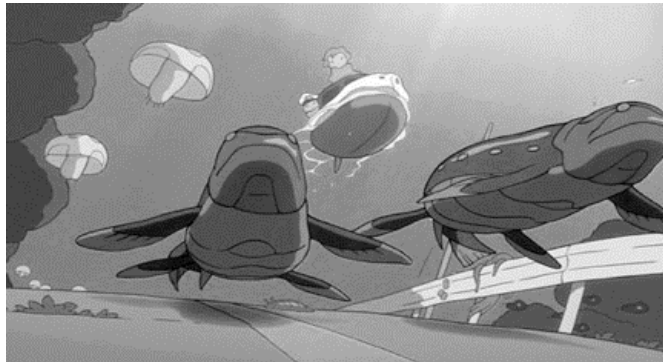


Figure 5. Ponyo and Sôsuke observing prehistoric fish

The unease Napier detects intersects with Miyazaki's statement that *Ponyo* is his "response to the afflictions and uncertainty of our times."⁶⁸ The storm, tsunami, and flood in this animation are lifesaving rather than lethal. This natural disaster encourages community outreach and Miyazaki's concern is for the future of humankind. The tsunami in the film washes away pollution, reinstates the power of the *wata no hara*, and encourages a selfless response to the natural disaster. The 3/11 tsunami in many ways mirrored Miyazaki's vision of community outreach. While there was nothing "gentle" or "magical" about this real tsunami, the compassion and benevolence reported in the media is reminiscent of the villagers in *Ponyo* offering victims transportation to the hotels, helping to locate lost family members, and checking on people's health:

The Japanese people have retained their composure, trying to help each other out whenever possible. Shopkeepers have cut prices on staple goods and shoppers line up patiently to pay, without bickering or trying to queue jump. They know they are all in the same boat, and no one wants to lose either self-respect or that of the community. Those lucky few whose houses were left unscathed by the disaster offer refuge to their homeless neighbours, and fundraising campaigns have been launched across the country to support stranded pets. People in Japan realize only too well

⁶⁸ Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008*, 420.

that the only way of getting through these hard times is by sticking together.⁶⁹

In the film, there is a sense of order and efficiency post-tsunami. Boats of adults row in time to reach safety points, the father of a baby gives Sōsuke a candle, and everybody asks if they can help Ponyo and Sōsuke in their journey to find Lisa, Sōsuke's mother. The significance of community outreach is emphasised in a very literal way with the motif of hands reaching out to others. The best example is when Ponyo gives a mother the thermos of soup from her backpack and a pile of sandwiches, all to ensure she is healthy for her baby. The baby, who initially appears listless, reaches out to receive Ponyo's cup as she offers it, and then extends her arms as her mother receives the soup in the cup. When the baby becomes distressed after Ponyo departs, she runs across the top of the water to calm the baby with her magic. It appears that she makes the baby happy as her face becomes flushed and jovial. Interestingly, the baby is dressed in a blue jumpsuit with fish on her bib. This reiterates that it is the innocence of children who are the hope for the future because they respect marine life. This connects with Miyazaki's comment that, "[t]he film ends with instability and concern for the future. But that is the fate of the human race beyond the twenty-first century, a topic that can't be settled in one film."⁷⁰

Gake no Ue no Ponyo reveals humankind's steady destruction of the *wata no hara* through their careless polluting of the waters and selfish over-fishing. While Fujimoto wants to eliminate humans and their "black souls," Miyazaki's message is more closely aligned with the Shinto belief system. There is no revenge nor punishment in the film, just the "kind of cleansing regeneration that is connected with and reinforces the power of nature."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Monisha, "Post-quake Japan: Compassion Triumphs Amid Disaster," March 26, 2011 (accessed May 29, 2017, <http://cestopis.exblog.jp/16102473/>).

⁷⁰ Miyazaki, *Turning Point 1997–2008*, 424.

⁷¹ Bye, "Two Worlds Colliding," 107.

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