

# Complex Identities in Contemporary Animated Cinema between Posthumanism and Ecocriticism

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## Abstract

This article shows how animation emerged as a suitable medium for depicting hybrid identities between human and non-human beings. It also shows how animation was an important resource for developing an ecocritical imaginary and ethics that rejected oppositional dualisms and the paradigm of the exceptional human. The first section outlines the rigid and 'proprietary' conception of identity and shows how this has contributed to the consolidation of human supremacy over the environment and the non-human. The second paragraph analyses examples of flexible identities based on relationships, hybridisation and change and shows how this kind of identity has contributed to the development of new ecologies. The third section outlines the characteristics of identity in the contemporary posthumanist and ecocritical framework based on sympoietic and interspecies constructions of networks of biological data, personal decisions, conscious and unconscious desires, relations and hybridisations. The final paragraph attributes to the poietic and metamorphic power of animation its effectiveness in representing these posthumanist identities, in showing the agency of non-human beings and in soliciting a fully ecocritical ecological sensitivity, in that it rejects clear-cut oppositions and human exceptionalism by aiming for a radically new way of conceiving human beings, nature, technology and their relationships.

This article aims at showing how animation has emerged as a particularly suitable medium for depicting hybrid identities between human and non-human beings. It also shows how animation was an important resource for developing an ecocritical imaginary and ethics that rejected oppositional dualisms and the paradigm of the exceptional human.<sup>1</sup>

The first section outlines the rigid and “proprietary” conception of identity and how this has contributed to a hierarchical understanding of living beings and the consolidation of human supremacy over the environment and the non-human. This kind of identity will be exemplified by looking at the protagonists of *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Ponyo* (2008), directed by Miyazaki Hayao.

The next section will point to the protagonists of *Wolfwalkers* (2020), directed by Tomm Moore, and *Metropolis* (2001), directed by Rintaro, as successful examples of mediation between identities. This case illustrates a flexible and dynamic idea of identity, and the value of relationships, hybridisation and change. It also shows how this dynamic idea of identity has contributed to the development of new ecologies.

The third section outlines the characteristics of identity in the contemporary posthumanist and ecocritical framework. Here, the deconstruction of rigidities and the mediation between opposites is overcome to arrive at the sympoietic and interspecies construction of personal and changing networks of biological data, personal decisions, conscious and unconscious desires, relations and hybridisations (Haraway 2016; Marchesini 2016). The examples chosen to illustrate this type of identity are the protagonists of *Wolf Children* (2015), directed by Hosoda Mamoru, and those of *Zima Blue* (2019), an episode of the first season of *Love, Death + Robots* directed by Robert Valley.

The fourth and final paragraph concludes the article by attributing to the poietic and metamorphic power of animation its effectiveness in representing these types of posthumanist identity and in soliciting an ecological sensitivity. This ecological sensitivity is not only based on conservation and respect for the natural environment, but is fully ecocritical, in that it rejects clear-cut oppositions and human exceptionalism by aiming for a radically new way of conceiving human beings, nature, technology and their relationships (Bennett 2010; Iovino 2008; Morton 2009; 2013).

## Rigid Identities and Incompatible Oppositions

One of the most deeply rooted and widespread conceptions of identity in Western thought is, and has been, the “proprietary” one, although the concept of identity is among the most debated in philosophy, with its innumerable definitions. The “proprietary” conception of identity has its origins in the Aristotelian thought and envisages that something can be defined through a list of the properties that connote it on an ontological level. This means that something is defined through the set of all (and possibly the only) characteristics that make that entity as it is and that differentiate it from all other entities. This conception of identity applied to living beings has not only tried to establish their essential properties, but has also aimed at setting a coherent and stable system of relations of similarity and difference that has divided creatures into genera and species and allowed individuals to be defined by their belonging to the same type. This way of viewing the world, and especially living beings, is certainly the one that has proved most useful for taxonomic and classificatory purposes and on which modern science has relied to organise its knowledge, from Aristotle to Linnaeus’ nomenclature. Its advantages are obvious, from its logical and formal neatness to its consistent systematic nature and to its convenience in practical applications.

There are features of this way of thinking, however, which, especially when expanded beyond the limits of the epistemology of certain disciplines, have had substantial effects not only in the way human beings have imagined themselves and their relationship with the world, but also on an ethical and social level, even going so far as to establish aesthetic principles. The “proprietary” conception of identity, together with the classificatory view derived from it, have established and fortified the difference as the essential condition of existence. This has led to a clear separation between human and animal, animal and plant, living and non-living, nature and technology, soul and body, spirit and matter, etc. Not only did these divisions become fundamental, but they also became hierarchical: the difference was not established between equal alternatives, but between upper and lower categories. Thus, the first elements of the dichotomies existed not only on the basis of their separation from their opposi-

te, but because of their superiority over it. The culmination of this attitude was the emergence of human exceptionalism, i.e. the belief that human beings were ontologically and ethically superior to all other creatures because they were endowed with something (logical reasoning, language, self-awareness, free will, etc.) that clearly distinguished them from the rest of the creatures.

This ontological position of humanity has also had ethical implications, that is, it has legitimised the deprivation of non-human beings of any dignity, form of will, agency or right as they are morally inferior and, therefore, rightly subject to human arbitrary will. Plants, animals and the entire environment have then become goods at the disposal of human beings, protected, exploited or exterminated according to their needs and decisions, in an ecological relationship based on predation, exploitation and domination.

This inclination towards division and hierarchisation has also taken place in the social sphere, between and within human communities. It is always the “proprietary”, rigid and hierarchical logic of identity, in fact, that has enabled many dichotomous divisions and dominations, such as those between genders (with the masculine dominating the feminine) and between populations (with European men above the others).

In the field of aesthetics, too, the dichotomous and hierarchising view has contributed to the creation of a strong model, namely that of “purity”. This idea is based on Aristotelian principles that found beauty on the harmony of the parts and on the respect for a categorical ought-to-be. It also bounded with classical and neoclassical ideals that eschew hybridisations of forms, genres and categories. In this case, however, there was no single, stable hierarchy established with humanity at the top; rather, different aesthetics were developed, each celebrating one of the three poles: nature, humanity and technology (each of them declined in countless different ways). Some, in fact, have extolled the beauty of an unspoiled and wild or pacified and idyllic nature; others have placed humanity as the supreme aesthetic model, with its harmony of proportions; and yet others have placed technology at the pinnacle, as the rational and artificial perfection or the display of pure concretised power. Whichever pole is chosen, in most cases the choice has been made and then upheld in the name of the pristine “purity” of the selected model, abhorring any possibility of hybridi-

sation, proximity, intermingling or even coexistence. Indeed, in all classical and neoclassical aesthetics, beauty came to coincide with an ideal of harmony and balance that also implied a search for self-determination and respect for some given canon. If the model is pure and unspoiled nature, for example, then man and technology can only disfigure and degrade it, or at best they can aim at not affecting it and making themselves as irrelevant as possible. If beauty coincides with technology, on the other hand, the flesh of humans and non-humans, their bodies and biology are nothing but limits, a horrible prison that one could aim to eradicate, as in some transhuman aesthetics, for example. In all cases where an aesthetic principle of “purity” dominates, therefore, the one constant is the consideration of hybridisations and mingling as uncanny, disharmonious, obscene or grotesque contaminations.

Even in the sphere of personal identities, the “proprietary” model has led to a rigid conception of identity. If an individual is determined by a set of defining characteristics, they will be by definition the most important components of their inner self and, above all, they will be immutable or difficult to alter. The resulting identity is monolithic and articulated around pivots that are all the more stable, solid and appreciable the more numerically reduced, simple and unproblematic they are. They are placed in a hierarchy determined by the social ladder, and which establishes the individual’s destiny. These types of identities are apparently very solid and certainly reassuring for those who are granted supremacy. In fact, they mask the hierarchies they imply by disguising them as a biological and natural fact and are hardly capable of processing change, intercultural and inter-subjective dialogue and relations with the world and the non-human, except in a very rigid manner.

In order to exemplify how these identities are represented in animated cinema, I chose two characters from Miyazaki Hayao’s films. Unlike many others in this director’s works, they fail to construct for themselves identities able of mediation that steadily accommodate elements of hybridisation. For example, San, the protagonist of *Princess Mononoke* (1997), would be ideally placed to mediate between the humans of Irontown and the spirits of the forest plundered by humans. She was a little girl who was abandoned by her mother and left to the wolves who attacked the caravan with whi-



Fig. 1 | San and Moro (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997, dir. Miyazaki Hayao)



Fig. 2 | Ponyo's forms (*Ponyo*, 2008, dir. Miyazaki Hayao)

ch she was crossing the forest. San was then raised as a she-wolf by Moro, the matriarch of the pack. Being biologically human and culturally integrated into the community of the spirits of the forest, she could, more than anyone else, be able to understand and mediate the instances of the two struggling groups and construct a complex identity for herself [Fig. 1]. However, this possibility fails completely, as San conceives of the world in a strictly dichotomous way: the spirits of the forest are ontologically pure and morally superior to her, while the disgust, anger and contempt she feels for human beings is total and unsurmountable. Of course, this is linked to her maternal rejection and her total identification with the spirits and implies a lack of acceptance of complex and deep-rooted parts of herself, which cannot be fully analysed here. The rigidity of the division between human and non-human in which she desires and seeks to fit in, however, is a

significant fact in itself.

The protagonist of *Ponyo* (2008) could also be in a very effective position as a mediator: she is in fact the daughter of a sea deity and a human magician, endowed with extraordinary metamorphic abilities that allow her to adapt not only her psychic identity, but also her body to inner changes and to the environment [Fig. 2]. Again, however, Ponyo cannot really connect the two worlds. When she decides to leave the sea in order to escape her father's suffocating control and also out of her affection for Sosuke, a human child, she is confronted by her mother with a sharp alternative: either she will return to the sea for ever or she will undertake a test. This test involves her renouncing her powers and relying on Sosuke's love. If he truly loves her, she will become fully human, losing powers and metamorphic abilities, but if the child is not able to fully accept her, she will vanish, becoming sea foam. Besides the fact that, in the most patriarchal of traditions, the one who has to risk the supreme sacrifice is the woman and the one who determines her destiny (for that matter based solely on his own feelings) is the man, the choice appears entirely dichotomous. Ponyo's extraordinary, vitalistic and aesthetically effective metamorphic ability upsets the established order, it must be limited to childhood and a liminal situation, but it cannot be preserved, it cannot be a bridge between two worlds that must remain separate. Human and non-human are irreconcilable and no truly ecocritical perspective seems possible. Certainly, the film visually denounces the pollution of the sea and provides a very strong critique of human action against nature through the words and actions of Ponyo's father, who arrives at a form of radical misanthropy, and celebrates the beauty and power of nature, but it does not seem to really succeed in proposing a synthesis of the two worlds in a perspective of radical renewal.

### Flexible Identities and Instances of Mediation

The scenario described by Tomm Moore in *Wolfwalkers* (2020) appears very similar to that imagined by Miyazaki in *Princess Mononoke*: an expanding city busy deforesting is opposed to a forest inhabited by wolves (there are, of course, countless differences: the cultural context represented, the drawing style, the tone and genre of the work, the characteristics of the characters, the narrative structure, etc). Again,





Fig. 3 | Robin's wolf transformation (*Wolfwalkers*, 2020, dir. Tomm Moore)



Fig. 4 | Robots and humans putting together Tima's pieces (*Metropolis*, 2001, dir. Rintaro)

two characters are in a suitable position to mediate: the first is Mebh, a wolfwalker child, daughter of the forest matriarch.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to San, however, she is willing to take on this role; her resentment and distrust towards mankind are mixed with curiosity and a search for friendly contact. In this way, the relationship between her and Robyn, the second mediating figure and the daughter of the hunter hired to exterminate the wolves, becomes the basis for mutual acquaintance of the two worlds and for interspecies relations (Haraway 2016). Not only do two identities come into contact, but they open up to each other and reassess themselves through this contact. They accept the idea that a creature is not restricted to its own species and does not have to be defined in an ultimate way but can reconfigure its identity according to the interspecies relationships and the environment it manages to weave. If Mebh must learn about human beings (for better and for worse), Robyn, inadvertently bitten by Mebh,

must also question her own social identity as a citizen, who should hate and fear wolves, and her gender identity as a good, obedient daughter, and her species identity, as a human being. She manages, therefore, to find a personal way to accept and render her hybrid nature meaningful. In this way, not only the hierarchy between human and animal is disrupted, but also social and gender relations are deconstructed. Hybridism and metamorphosis are no longer a dangerous infringement of the inviolable cosmic order (Alaimo 2010; Haraway 2016; Opperman 2016) as they were in *Ponyo*, but become a possible resource for building a new order and a new world. Even on an aesthetic level, there is no abhorrence of contamination. On the contrary, the transformations between human and wolf are depicted as marvellous and enchanting [Fig. 3]. The movie, therefore, does not merely suggest an ecological approach based on nature conservation (indeed, in the end the wolves and wolfwalkers have to move to more remote locations and let the city clear the forest), but deconstructs divisions as such. In the movie there is no idea of a pristine nature superior to humankind, nor any call for a reversal of supremacy between humans and nature. The replies to the Anthropocene, thus, are not those dominant in 1970s ecology or deep ecology, but are much closer to the contemporary ecocritical and posthumanist sensibility that aims at sympoiesis, at the interweaving of complex and hybrid relations, at replacing the oppositional ideas of nature and culture with more complex interdependent natural-cultural forms (Iovino 2008; Braidotti, Balzano 2020; Haraway 2016).

A similar perspective is also found in *Metropolis* (2001), directed by Rintaro, yet in relation to the mediation and construction of interspecies and sympoietic relationships between humans and machines. In this film, there is a dichotomous and sharp division between humans and robots or androids, and any proximity or intermingling appears uncanny. Once again, the bridge across which the mediations take place is the hybrid identity of the protagonist. Tima believes she is a girl suffering from amnesia and builds her identity on the assumption of her humanity, while also showing empathy towards machines.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this feeling that gradually leads the protagonists, and the spectators with them, to rethink certain divisions and principles of human exceptionalism, coming to attribute to machines certain typically human characteristics,

such as feelings and empathy. At the same time, the ethical and moral limits of the human species become clear. When Tima finally discovers that she is a gynoid, she must rethink the dichotomies of the society in which she has lived and question not only human superiority, but the very fact that there are clear differences between human beings and machines. In this film, too, the perspective is far from irenic. Indeed, in *Wolfwalkers* the protagonists and their parents, while failing to integrate the two communities, manage to save both peoples by migrating. By contrast, in *Metropolis* the situation precipitates to the point of an apocalypse that destroys the entire city-state in a massacre of men and machines. This outcome, however, does not derive from the futility of a mediation perspective, but precisely from the durability of dichotomous divisions, which are ontological, but also social and economic (as shown by the Luddite conflicts between the proletariat and the machines and the clear separation of the city elite from the rest of the social body). Indeed, even in the apocalypse, the last prospect of hope is provided precisely by inter-species empathic bonds between the male protagonist and the surviving machines who try to literally put the pieces of Tima back together to build a new, less hierarchical and divided future [Fig. 4]. In the ecocritical and posthumanist context, such vision of technology is very relevant: technology is not separated from nature and the human beings and it is placed in a positive and supportive relationship with them. This perspective contributes to breaking down the sharp division between the biological sphere (human, animal and plant), seen as natural, and the technological sphere, pointed out as unnatural, and pushes, instead, towards visions that integrate them. It also strengthens the position of those who do not see the human species as increasingly deviating from the natural state due to its use of technology. In this view it is also believed that technology is the natural evolutionary specificity of human beings (Havelange, Lenay, Stewart 2002) and that it can be a part of ecosystems and in possible positive interaction with them.<sup>4</sup>

### Complex Identities Between Posthumanism and Ecocriticism

The previous examples picture worlds dominated by sharp divisions between human being and nature or human beings and technology in which characters

with flexible and often hybrid identities on a biological or bio-cultural level attempt to mediate. The divisions are, however, still very significant and the framework in which these characters operate is one of internalised dichotomous rigidity that must be overcome. In a world characterised by social and gnoseological categorisations that are perceived as ontological and pre-existing facts, the philosophical effort must be that of their deconstruction. The point of identity construction, then, is to de-naturalise divisions, to problematise them and trace them back to their cultural and historical origin. For instance, the fact that androids and gynoids do not have feelings, lack free will and empathy in *Metropolis* seems obvious, taken for granted, natural and inherent to them, but instead this fact is problematised, discussed, questioned and thus deconstructed.

In the field of contemporary animated movies with an ecocritical and posthumanist sensibility, however, one can find identity models that show different perspectives in relation to this paradigm. Deconstruction is no longer the most relevant mechanism regulating the change and adaptation of personal and collective identities. This is because we have reached a very advanced level of de-naturalisation and have now understood that almost everything that appears objective to us is actually the result of compromises and interrelationships between the biological and material fact, our perceptions and our cultural constructs. On the contrary, from a need for liberation and the demolition of social and cultural differentiations and rigidities that had led to injustices, neuroses and limiting preconceptions, there has been a shift towards a search for radically new forms of identity construction. The rigidity of "proprietary" models and taxonomic pyramids having been broken down, infinite deconstruction also showed its limits, and the absolute liquidity of identity risked becoming an abyss of anguish and insecurity. This, on the one hand, prompted a paroxysmal and aggressive return to rigidity, but on the other hand also induced a search for new models.

This has established a horizon that is no longer anthropocentric and non-exceptionalist: nature, humanity and technology are no longer separate, male and female are not dichotomies, and the inorganic, biological species and technological apparatuses are part of a network of relationships in which identity is not determined a priori by separation. Instead, identity is labo-



Fig. 5 | Meta-wolf's forms (*Wolf Children*, 2015, dir. Hosoda Mamoru)

riously constructed and continually reshaped by biological data, desires, wills and cultural constructions, through configurations in which affective factors and interspecies relations are of utmost importance (Zanelli 2019). Even the Darwinian evolutionary model has had to incorporate the concepts of sympoiesis and collective evolution (Margulis 1998). Identities, therefore, except for renouncing rigidity and retaining the advantages gained from deconstruction, struggle to find stability in a dynamic equilibrium, in a world of horizontal interspecies relations (Sparti 1996). Everyone must therefore mediate between different instances, accept as part of themselves elements that are natural, artificial and cultural, in a search for meaning where ethics and personal choices, far from losing value, become more relevant than ontology and pre-established hierarchies. In this perspective, "purity" is not only not a lost ideal, but becomes a negation of reality and a reactionary form of the search for lost dominance. At the same time, cultural and techno-biological hybridisation becomes a new common condition.

An example of this understanding of identity is that of the child protagonists in *Wolf Children* (2015), directed by Hosoda Mamoru. In the world in which the story is set, there are creatures who, according to their will and not being able to transmit their condition by

bite, can transform themselves into either meta-wolves or actual wolves [Fig. 5].<sup>5</sup> One of them falls in love with a human woman with whom he establishes a relationship and begets two children. His death by accident when the children are still very young, however, makes it very difficult for the mother to raise the two sons who have inherited their father's metamorphic abilities. Moreover, they are not always able to consciously manage their form as they lack the physical and emotional control of an adult. The condition of these two children bears many similarities to that of San or the wolfwalkers in the film directed by Tom Moore, but the differences are significant. In fact, the two children do not become hybrids, but are hybrids from birth and do not live straddling two opposing societies or in two factions, but are the only specimens of their species in that context. This is why their quest, personal even before being social, is not about deconstructing barriers or de-naturalising hierarchies, but about constructing meaning. Of course, the two protagonists have to grow up with the awareness of the prejudice against wolves and the hostility and repulsion that their hybrid and metamorphic condition can cause to others and deconstruct them. The focus of the movie, however, is on the *pars construens* of their search for identity. The value of their animal part and how they should relate to their hybrid biology, to other humans and to the rest of the animals is not predetermined, it is an open question that they individually have to define. The ultimate point of arrival obviously depends on their biology, on the different relationships they establish and on their will, but it cannot be definitive, nor can it be infinitely discussed at all times: it must be fairly stable, but always flexible at the same time.

Identities related to the human-machine relationship can similarly leave aside ontology and hinge on research of subjective meaning. In the episode *Zima Blue* (2019) of *Love, Death + Robots*, for instance, the protagonist discovers his biological and ontological identity and then gradually reveals it to the journalist interviewing him and to the audience.<sup>6</sup> The protagonist seems to be a human artist who has gradually replaced his entire body with mechanical parts and electronic devices: a complete cyborg [Fig. 6]. The final narrative twist, however, reveals that he started out as a simple robot for automatically cleaning swimming pools and was then implemented and made more and more sen-





Fig. 6 | Zima Transformation into a cyborg (*Zima Blue*, 2019, dir. Robert Valley)

tient by more advanced software and hardware [Fig. 7]. Transformations followed one another until he himself appears to have forgotten he was a machine and his metal body had been replaced by a biological one. It is, therefore, a robot that became sentient and then biological and then mechanical again. At first, what strikes the audience is the narrative surprise, which works precisely on the basis of the dichotomous framework that the theme foreshadows. At a later stage, however, it becomes clear that the material that makes up Zima's body and his human or cybernetic origin are completely irrelevant to his artistic production and his search for meaning. His sensitivity, his consciousness and his reflection on the meaning of existence, in fact, have a value that transcends the boundary between machine and human being and are not in the least affected by this worthless dichotomy. Even the final stage of his search for the meaning of existence and a direct and whole relationship with the environment and the entire cosmos (however questionable) is not linked to his biological or species condition. He chooses to return to a not entirely self-conscious simplicity by refusing to be a sentient machine as much as a human being.

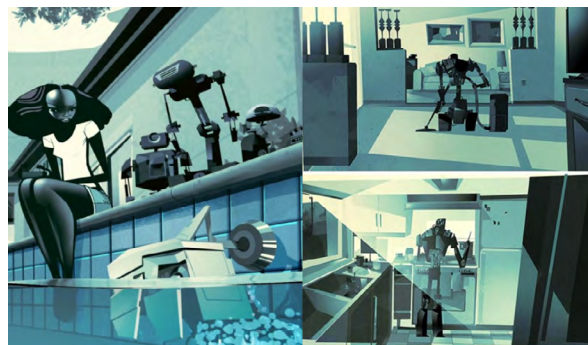


Fig. 7 | Zima evolution as a robot (*Zima Blue*, 2019, dir. Robert Valley)

The relationship between environment, humans and machines in these two examples does not simply seek to limit technological progress and favour the preservation of an idealised nature separate from humankind and technology, as much ecology since the 1970s has done. Rather, it is an ecocritical, posthumanist and anti-anthropocentric perspective that, instead of ontology and categorisations, focuses on overcoming personal and social conflicts through the construction of networks of interspecies relations in a techno-natural-cultural continuum of subjective and context based choices, personal or collective.

### The Value of Animation for Post-humanism and Ecocriticism

In addition to the subject matter analysed so far, there is also a link between animation and the representation of hybrid and post-humanist identities in an ecocritical context. This concerns the ontological characteristics and expressive possibilities of the medium itself, as well as the presence of a long and constant tradition. In animated cinema, in fact, these themes have been prominent since the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, especially in American, European and Japanese cinematography.<sup>7</sup> Considering their presence in feature-length animated films produced all over the world, the relationship between animation and ecocriticism is conspicuous, if not for its complexity and depth, then for its earliness, numerical relevance and continuity.

The metamorphic and poetic power of animated cinema (Wells 1998) are the main reasons that allowed



this medium to be so suitable for dealing with these themes. For decades, the representation of objects and creatures that change shape abruptly, especially when within works with realistic or verisimilar intentions, was rather complex. Admittedly, experts in make-up, editing and technical devices capable of achieving these effects have existed since the origin of cinema, but this was a rather small and very laborious range of possibilities. Of course, the birth and development of CGI simplified everything, but for several years its use at a high level was very expensive. In animated cinema on the contrary, it is very easy, and always has been, to depict sudden changes, gradual appearances and disappearances and metamorphoses from one form to another. To portray hybrid, flexible and often changing identities on a biological as well as cultural level, animation is not the only possible medium, but it is certainly the one with the most established tradition of techniques and communication codes to do so. Depicting Robyn when she turns from a human into a she-wolf in *Wolfwalkers*, for instance, would certainly be possible even with make-up or photorealistic CGI, but animation makes it not only simpler, but also more readable for the audience, who place it in an established tradition of enchanted metamorphoses in animation. The risk of using photorealistic CGI for such a scene, in fact, is to plunge the viewer into the Uncanny Valley (Mori, MacDorman, Kageki 2012) and give the event repulsive and shocking characteristics. The clash between a realistic live action diegesis and unrealistic special effects, on the other hand, could easily come across as comical or suggest an altered, or at least strongly alienating, perception of the event. The drawing and animation style used by Moore for *Wolfwalkers*, on the other hand, due to the characteristics and history of the medium, is well suited to represent a post-humanist horizon where hybridisation and metamorphosis are viewed positively, with wonder and longing.<sup>8</sup>

The poietic powers of animation, i.e. those linked to the possibility of creating a world completely autonomous from the real one, also make animation a particularly effective medium for criticising human exceptionalism and imagining ecological and sympoietic realities. Animation, while not necessarily precluding any referential link with reality (as shown by animated documentaries) or any realistic effect, is certainly one of the languages that can most easily depart from our

world. Within a universe that is imagined and drawn independently from the real one, every element, every stroke, every colour, every light, every change is an autonomous stylistic and creative choice (even though it is subject to the limits of the tools and the production context in which it is made). Hence, the strong and productive link between animation and fantasy and the prolificacy in it of genres such as fairy tale, fable, allegory, fantasy and science fiction. If we imagine a world that is very different from our own or completely apart from it, then animation is certainly not an automatic choice, but even in this case it is a channel that rests on a robust tradition and consolidated communicative codes. In our world, that of the Anthropocene, dominated by humans, hybridisations, mutations and metamorphoses are viewed negatively and non-human creatures have no rights or dignity. Therefore, before attempting to realise a sympoietic universe of interspecies bonds, a fantastical representation of it is necessary and animation can contribute conspicuously to its imagination (Meschiari 2019; 2020).

It is precisely the agency of the non-human, whether technological, biological or inorganic, that evokes another strong link between ecocriticism and animated cinema. The theories of the contemporary new materialisms (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010) have much insisted on how even plants and animals, and even inorganic matter and single-celled beings, have the capacity to act on each other and are connected in networks of complex actions and reactions.<sup>9</sup> There is, therefore, a new way of understanding the ecosystem that goes beyond the vision of an inert background made up of non-sentient things that have no agency, no ability to cause effects and no ability to actively influence others (except perhaps in a mechanical and deterministic way). This new perspective, on the other hand, sees reality as a living and changing network of relations and interactions, whether intentional and conscious or not, between entities, human or non-human, on complex levels (Barad 2007; Bennet 2010; Haraway 2016; Morton 2013). Again, to represent this view of the world, animation is not the only possible way, but it has a feature that makes it particularly suitable: that of giving movement and the semblance of life to things that would appear to have none. If cinema is the art of filming a movement by separating it into static images and then reproducing it through them, animation is the art of creating a movement that ne-

ver existed through elements that are in themselves static. Thus, it allows expression through still objects, be they drawings, clay figurines, three-dimensional objects, sand compositions, paintings, nail panels, etc., and is thereby suitable for imagining and representing the agency of the non-human. A considerable degree of anthropomorphisation and projection of the human onto things, plants and animals is involved in these processes, and the metaphorical and allegorical work is decisive, but there is also a clear perception of alienation from Cartesian reality and vitalism of things.<sup>10</sup> This sensation can be so strong as to be uncanny in perceiving how an independent, non-human will is at play and represented; or it can be exciting and a source of a primal wonder resembling the one animism sees in nature. Either way, both of these sensations lead one to consider the environment, plants and objects as not inert, taken for granted and at the mercy of the human will. Thus, animation has consolidated a tradition of backgrounds crawling with life, of animated objects, with human eyes, voices and movements, of conscious plants, of more or less anthropomorphic animals, and of complex and non-obvious links with the environment.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, the contemporary ecocritical and posthumanist field is characterised by the presence of flexible, layered and hybrid identities, which seek a dynamic equilibrium through creatures that not only mediate between nature, humanity and technology, but are themselves composed as a synthesis of elements that rejects hierarchical divisions as an ethical and aesthetic model. In this context, the treatment of such themes in animated cinema has not only led to outcomes of considerable depth, but in many cases it has prompted the imagination of a paradigm of relationship with the environment and the non-human that is radically different from the one dominating until two decades ago. This outcome is due not only to the thematic exploration carried out by animated cinema, but also supported and facilitated by certain characteristics of the medium, including its metamorphic and poietic potential, and by an established tradition of imagining other possible scenarios.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A special thanks goes to Silvia Zanelli: her bibliographical advice, the discovery of her work and the fruitful discussion with her have deepened my understanding of the concept of identity in the posthumanist and ecocritical context from a philosophical perspective.

<sup>2</sup> They are anthropomorphic beings with more or less pronounced feline features and endowed with magical powers, especially thaumaturgic ones. During sleep they can separate the spirit from the body, and the spirit can move in ethereal form or take the physical form of a wolf. Their bite can also transform a human into a wolfwalker.

<sup>3</sup> On the value of empathy in the contemporary ecocritical and posthumanist field, there is an open debate between those who place it as a horizon of hope and possibility for a multispecies and sympoietic coexistence (to the point of constructing real ethics of suffering and empathy) and those who consider this position illusory and irenic, and even a new ideology aimed at concealing power conflicts in the Anthropocene. In this regard see Morton (2019); Haraway (2016); Butler (2006); Braidotti, Balzano (2020).

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Marco Pavanini for the ideas and insights I have drawn from his lecture entitled Postumanismo e tecnicità costitutiva umana, which he gave at the Collegio Ghislieri in Pavia as part of the cycle *Il postumanesimo contemporaneo tra filosofia, letteratura e cinema*. The full recording is available on the College's YouTube channel at the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5A9pB76F-SU&ab\\_channel=CollegioGhislieri](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5A9pB76F-SU&ab_channel=CollegioGhislieri) (accessed June 21, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Meta-wolves are hybrid creatures between human and wolf, with fur, muzzle and paws, but bipeds, structurally anthropomorphic and able to communicate using human language.

<sup>6</sup> This episode displays a sensibility, as well as an aesthetic, that is very different from most of the other episodes in the series, which, instead, often employ photorealism and hyperrealism to depict mutations, hybridisation and metamorphosis in an uncanny and negative manner.

<sup>7</sup> Many Japanese and Western science fiction and fantasy films were pioneers in this respect, leading to films such as *Fantastic Planet* (1973), directed by René Laloux; *Wizards* (1977), directed by Ralph Bakshi; *The Secret of Nimh* (1982), directed by Don Bluth; Gwen, or the *Book of Sand* (1985), directed by Jean-François Laguionie.

<sup>8</sup> Due to its expressive, photorealistic and hyper-realistic power, animation is also well suited to depicting hybridisations, mutations and metamorphoses in a deliberately uncanny manner, even to the point of achieving horror shades of great aesthetic and emotional impact. See the results achieved in much animated science fiction, as, for example, did most of the episodes of *Love, Death + Robots*.

<sup>9</sup> The question of agency is different from those of will, self-awareness and intentionality, which are linked to them in complex ways that vary from author to author.

<sup>10</sup> The debate on the value and functioning of the anthropomorphisation of nature is wide ranging and the positions in this regard are varied. On the one hand, it has served to reduce the otherness of nature contributing to an idealised and distorted view of animals that has hindered scientific knowledge and the recognition of their specific forms of agency. On the other hand, however, the possibilities of anthropomorphising nature offered by animation have stimulated in the audience empathic reactions with nature and animals and have even

permitted identification with them (see Cubitt 2005; Baker 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Films like *Toy Story* (1995), produced by Pixar Animation Studios, or *City of Lost Things* (2020), directed by Yee Chih-yen, are particularly significant as examples of the perception of the agency of things as living-things.

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