Princess Mononoke (1997) Show Notes

❖ *Princess Mononoke: Understanding Studio Ghibli's Monster Princess* **(Ed. Rayna Denison)** --- This book probably serves as the best general introduction to critical discussion of *Princess Mononoke*. Essays in this book cover every topic from production and reception to evaluation of the film itself. The essays we found most insightful were "Deer Gods, Nativism and History: Mythical and Archaeological Layers in Princess Mononoke" by Eija Niskanen, and "To 'See with Eyes Unclouded by Hate': Princess Mononoke and the Quest for Environmental Balance" by Tracey Daniels-Lerberg & Matthew Lerberg. We'll include some interesting passages below:

➢ **"Deer Gods, Nativism and History: Mythical and Archaeological Layers in Princess Mononoke"**

▪ "Ashitaka and his tribe are established in the film as Emishi, the northern tribe of Japan's main island, Honshū, which resisted the Yamato Emperor during the subjugation campaign by the Nara-based Imperial court between 744 and 811, but even after that suppression effort a large part of the Emishi's land was still not under Imperial control" (42)

▪ "The Emishi sustained themselves more by hunting and fishing than the Yamato, who depended primarily on rice farming. Each Emishi tribe lived in their self-governed village (*mura*) making strategic alliances with neighbor villages only during times of unrest… the Emishi characters' clothing is embroidered in a style reminiscent of the Ainu folk costumes, with big, bold and brightly coloured embroidery" (44-45)

▪ "As there are no archaeological records of Emishi clothing, Miyazaki used his imagination…The mixture in clothing highlights the way Ghibli animators tend to use different cultural and regional references in their films…Here the question of cultural appropriation naturally arises: to what ends is this imaginative freedom in mixing both features of Ainu traditions and other Asian cultural traditions used? In *Princess Mononoke*, I argue that, based on Miyazaki's conscious efforts to show history in a different light, Miyazaki aims not only for a colourful design, but also for a certain deconstruction of what is 'historical' Japan" (45-46)

▪ "The inclusion of the tower in the opening sequence, and the references to Emishi bring into *Princess Mononoke* an interesting subtext in relation to nationalistic discourse, especially in relation to the *Nihonjinron*, theories about Japaneseness. This concept refers to mostly Japan-based post-war theories and writings, ranging from the academic to the popular, about how to interpret Japan and Japanese culture and society…Common to these theories are the concepts of uniqueness of Japanese culture, as compared to other cultures and especially the West, and the homogeneity

of the Japanese nation. In *Nihonjinron* the concepts of nationality, ethnicity and culture are consequently often used synonymously. These ideas are incorporated and critiqued by Miyazaki…he counters the *Nihonjinron* claim of Japan as a country with one ethnically-based nationality" (47-48)

- ➢ **"To 'See with Eyes Unclouded by Hate': Princess Mononoke and the Quest for Environmental Balance"**

  - ▪ "The obscurity of precisely drawn and stable allegiances in *Princess Mononoke* underscores a larger environmental issue in the film: sides cease to exist an environmental upheaval threatens all living beings, even those responsible for initiating environmental catastrophe" (58)

  - ▪ "*Princess Mononoke* wants to establish affinity groups along non-traditional trajectories without valorizing the past or suppressing its tangled histories, but rather moves battle lines into webs of relations… separating human from non-human becomes an exercise of ambiguity and nuance, rather than clearly demarcated lines that cleave any affinity between them" (62-63)

  - ▪ "This commitment also grounds an alternative sense of historically knotted connections across species as *Princess Mononoke* reveals the storied relationship between the Emishi people and the red elk. The relationship between the two species is, as [Donna] Haraway argues, 'a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down'. Ashitaka and Yakul's knot – material, agential, and social – includes their 'muddled histories', which for both Ashitaka and Yakul is a blend of factual and fictional histories…This muddled history, which blends both fact and fiction, illustrates the need for the type of co-species 'response and respect [that is] possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories'" (65)

  - ▪ "[Ashitaka] realizes the end game will result in the death of one or both of the sides, thereby reinforcing the very binary thinking he attempts to resist. His dual allegiance serves as his means to undermine dualistic thinking" (68)

- ❖ ***The Samurai Films of Akira Kurosawa* by David Desser** --- This book is a fantastic examination of Kurosawa's work, and the introductory chapters are so concise they provided useful material for our conversation of *Princess Mononoke* as well. Sadly, it's OOP, but worth it if you can manage to find a copy. We'll include the passage below:

  - ➢ "The obsolescence of the Samurai as a warrior class during the Tokugawa era is one of the key structural underpinnings of the Samurai film. Filmmakers' seeming unwillingness to situate their Samurai dramas in the more violent Momoyama or Muromachi period indicates the function the Samurai genre fulfills to the Japanese mind. The audience must confront, at every moment the film is on screen, both the obsolescence and the eventual destruction of the way of life of which the hero is part.

It puts the hero of the film in the curious position of being unable to succeed no matter what course of action he takes" (23).

❖ *Love in a Time of Slaughters: Human-Animal Stories Against Genocide and Extinction* **by Susan McHugh** --- This terrific book examines several fictions (*Princess Mononoke* being one of them) in reference to the relationships between humans and animals they depict. McHugh excels at presenting what might at first seem like an unconventional or shallow analysis in rigorous, thought-provoking terms. Highly recommend this book. We'll include some interesting passages below:

➢ "Translated literally, the *mononoke* in Miyazaki's title and in Japanese folklore more generally indicates a spirit who comes to curse, and it is in the form of outrage at the destructiveness of modern-industrial humans that the film's animal gods are introduced…anger about the conditions of individuals numbering among the last of their kind, those who are cast into the position of what ecologists term *the living dead*, adds menace to the gods' appearances, especially in the form of giant wolves" (23)

➢ "Of the two wolf species native to Japan, the largeness of the variously named Sakhalin, Ezo, or Hokkaido wolf (*Canis lupus hattai*) fits the profile of Miyazaki's central wolf characters better than the extant and comparatively diminutive Japanese or Honshu wolf (*Canis lupus hodophilax*), even if the range of the latter is closer to the film's scouting locations, and while both are listed as extinct, some believe the former could persist in Japan's remote northern islands…The uncertainty of species status and identity make room for animal-god characters to distinguish themselves instead relationally, by their attitudes toward historical and kinship ties to communities" (23)

➢ "Far from narrating a progression from feudal to capitalist society, *Mononoke* presents different kinds of people alongside animals and gods as all together engaged in struggles that concern differences of class, gender, sex, race, ability, age, and species. The point is to offer what its director sees as 'a far richer, more diverse history than is generally accepted.' The historical setting of *Mononoke* is clearly the Muromachi period (1336–1573), when burgeoning iron production led to widespread clearing of primeval forests in Japan, a time of ecological crisis exacerbated by chronic wars that in turn proved fatal for many of Japan's Indigenous peoples and cleared the way for the eradication of many native species. Although in these ways it remains rooted in a particular place and time, as one critic bluntly states, '*Mononoke* is certainly not a conventional history film.' Rather, it uses animation to mutate the Japanese genre of *jidaigeki*, inverting the typical focus of this 'premodern historical genre,' the stereotypically charismatic authority figures, in favor of the nameless others who usually enter these dramas only to be immediately eliminated or ignored" (27)

➢ "The film's pivotal representation of Emishi is enabled in part by the fact that little is known about these peoples, who are assumed to have been wiped out centuries before

the film is set, as one character pointedly observes. Circumstantial evidence suggests that they are missing ethnographic links between the Jōmon and the Ainu—or, as they prefer to be called, the Utari—who are the remaining Indigenous people of Japan. So it is in a halting way that *Mononoke* introduces the Emishi in the desperate situation of a people resisting assimilation against the odds. Restricted to one self-isolating community within the film, they represent a tiny and severely persecuted minority that is continuing to live only in hiding from the Yamato, who historically laid claim to their destruction with advanced weaponry" (28)

> "Against historical accounts of Japan's natives as 'savages' overcome by the more technologically savvy Yamato, the film relates their disappearances directly to the rise of imperial forces and the consequent degradation of the Emishi's harmonious relations with their local environment, which includes their animal gods. Because they are nothing if not conquered people, the visual cues that link the Emishi to Shinto—problematically still termed by some the 'natural religion' of Japan in order to legitimate modern imperial ideology—are more productively troubled here than in Miyazaki's other stories. Aligning Shinto with the peoples that they conquered constitutes a radical inversion of the traditional spiritual justifications of 'the Yamato imperial line and the Japanese people themselves.'"(28)

❖ "Art of Princess Mononoke" from *Characterdesignreferences.com* – This page has a tremendous collection of concept art.

❖ "Miyazaki's Heroines" by Freda Freiberg from *Senses of Cinema* --- Neat article discussing a particular character type through Miyazaki's various films.