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Spirit/Medium: Critically Examining the Relationship between Animism and Animation

Jolyon Baraka Thomas

Is it possible that Japanese anime have a connection with animism? Does the shared Latin root (*anima* = "life" or "soul") of the two loan words *animēshon* and *animizumu* bear some significance beyond etymological similarity (Masaki 2002: 90–91)? Is it true that anime directors help Japanese audiences reconnect with their animistic cultural roots (Ogihara-Schuck 2014)?

It seems to me that the answer to all of these questions must be a firm "No."

I argue in this chapter that we should not mistake the shared etymology of the words "animation" and "animism" for functional equivalence, nor should we assume that anime are vehicles for connecting audiences with "animistic" cultural traditions that are supposedly endemic to Japan. I do not deny that anime frequently feature spirits and deities. Many anime depict beautiful natural settings and stress the importance of human connections with nature; some imply or imagine the interpenetration of natural, social, and spiritual worlds.

Nevertheless, I do not think that "animism" is a good term for describing what anime directors do in a technical sense (animation), nor is "animism" a good descriptor of the multifarious reactions and dispositions directors aim to elicit from their audiences. Trying to describe anime content or audience reception with the vague concept of "animism" invites confusion because this seemingly simple word actually means many different things: "Animism" can be a pejorative descriptor of unsophisticated natives' mental worlds, can feature as part of hortatory calls to rectify environmental degradation, or can serve as obfuscatory language that places cultural essentialist claims beyond analysis or critique.[1]

I make my argument in five parts. I first provide a survey of the landscape of contemporary Japanese religion and discuss how anime fits within it. I then build on

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some recent critical literature to show that the concept of animism does not accurately describe Japan's idyllic premodern past. Rather, "animism" is a quintessentially modern category that *posits* an insurmountable divide between nature and culture rather than erasing it (Latour 1993). The concept of animism as it appears in scholarly discourse on anime reflects romanticized ideas about overcoming a perceived gulf between humans and nonhumans and environmentalist ideas about the problem of ecological degradation (Ingold 2011b; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Wilkinson 2017; Willerslev 2013a). If "animism" finds its way into scholarly discourse about animated films, I argue that it is not because films themselves are repositories for ancient dispositions but, rather, because contemporary filmmakers and their audiences use animated spirits to fill in the spaces between buffered selves and estranged natures.

This is an important point, but I quickly move from this functionalist claim to conduct a constructivist analysis of how specific stakeholders make the ambiguous concept of animism serve their particular interpretive purposes. In a nonexhaustive typology I describe these as "pejorative," "recuperative," and "obscurantist" animism. Against the temptation to read the preponderance of spirits in Japanese animated film as evidence of a timeless animistic tradition, I show that a focus on spirits as a type of *content* may distract from seeing how the anime *medium* elicits a certain kind of vision and can occasionally prompt ritual behavior that would seemingly be closer in spirit to the concept of "animism."

I then look at several animated films and television series featuring spirits. I use Nagahama Hiroshi's 2005–2006 animated series *Mushi-shi* as an example featuring mysterious entities found in the natural world. Morita Shūhei's 2013 short *Tsukumo* (aptly translated as *Possessions*) exemplifies the trope of objects coming to life. Finally, Shinkai Makoto's 2016 smash hit *Kimi no na wa.* (*Your Name.*) does not visually depict spirits, but the mysterious activity of the deity Musubi provides the explanatory principle for the magic that drives the narrative. Having shown that the existence of spirits in these recent anime films and series is not sufficient to say that they are "animistic," I conclude with a call to jettison that term in favor of more precise terminology. The films and television series that seemingly promote "animism" through the trope of spirits mediating between socially distant humans and humans estranged from nature actually seem to celebrate a sort of *cultivated vulnerability* that can be easily described without the confusing concept of animism.

The Place of Anime in Contemporary Japanese Religious Life

Contemporary Japanese society is notoriously nonreligious. Professions of religious belief are low, declarations of religious affiliation lower still, and the numbers of people who acknowledge the importance of religion are particularly meager among Japan's rapidly diminishing youth population. Somewhat paradoxically, Japan has a high number of religious edifices per capita, and according to official government statistics there is approximately one religious juridical person for every 700 people in Japan. Due to sample bias, the number of reported adherents in annual government surveys

regularly exceeds the population of Japan by about one and a half times, even though nongovernmental surveys suggest that the majority of individuals in Japan do not profess religious affiliation or belief (Roemer 2009).

This perplexing situation is further complicated by the fact that while few Japanese people admit to religious belief, many acknowledge the existence of ghosts, spirits, or deities. Even people who are relatively skeptical of the existence of such numinous entities will purchase apotropaic amulets and talismans or undergo periodic ritual purifications "just in case" the deities might intervene in their lives (Reader and Tanabe 1998). Horror films and popular comic book series regularly depict the trope of the wronged dead wreaking vengeance upon the living, a tradition that can be traced back to canonical Japanese literature and that also featured in the golden age of postwar Japanese cinema. Japanese bookstores feature "spirit world" sections that are often larger than the sections devoted to "religion," and popular television programs of the last two decades have featured charismatic spirit mediums (Baffelli 2016: 19–22).

There is an understandable temptation to see these contemporary popular culture portrayals of ghosts and spirits as manifestations of a timeless set of Japanese folk beliefs about death and the afterlife (Okuyama 2015; Reider 2005). Indeed, a cottage industry of scholarship traces how films, novels, and illustrated fiction like manga and anime preserve the vast Japanese pantheon of numinous entities in popular consciousness (Foster 2015; Masaki 2002; Reider 2005; Wright 2005). However, the idea that anime *preserve* classical "folk beliefs" in audience consciousness is difficult to prove. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, it is doubtful that classical religious and folkloric content can be maintained without also being transformed (Thomas 2007). Famed anime director Miyazaki Hayao, for example, may depict spirits who feature in Edo-period encyclopedias (such as *kodama* tree spirits) but he just as readily invents his own (e.g., Totoro). In many cases, an anime spirit cannot be traced to any specific religious tradition, mythic cycle, or classical text because characters appear for a variety of narratological reasons that have little to do with "official" doctrines (endowing characters with magical powers, providing a *deus ex machina* denouement, imbuing a story with comic relief; see Thomas 2012).

Faced with this ambiguity but seemingly eager to show that anime are conveyors of venerable cultural content, many professional observers have said that anime connect audiences with Japan's animistic traditions, if not with "religion." The concept of animism allows analysts to argue that films and television series tap into a substratum of Japanese cultural beliefs, a claim that is superficially persuasive but ultimately difficult to prove. Here are a few examples from a broader scholarly discourse on the creation and reception of Miyazaki Hayao's films:

> Japanese people of the past believed that almost all things that exist in this world have spirits residing in them [...] in religious studies we call this "animism." [...] Now, a work like [Miyazaki Hayao's] *My Neighbor Totoro* is called anime, but [like animism, the Latin] *anima* is the root word. [...] So if we translate "animation" directly, the meaning becomes "something which has been given life." [...] If you

> ask why I am discussing such things, it is precisely because the world of *Totoro* is this animism. (Masaki 2002: 90–91)

> When watching the fantastic anime (animation) of Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki, it soon becomes apparent that he has infused his richly detailed worlds with an animistic ontology that references ancient Japanese beliefs, practices and myths. His films describe an intriguing mixture of earthy spirituality particularly drawn from the Shinto tradition. (Wright 2005: 2)

> Miyazaki [Hayao] is a distinctive anime creator in that in his films he deeply engaged his own animistic thought, but these thoughts themselves have a long history in Japan. (Ogihara-Schuck 2014: 38)

> Through his anime, [Miyazaki] attempts to revive the enchantment of storytelling that the traditional folktales once had. [...] [H]e incorporates traditional folklore motifs ... as well as Shinto and Animism signifiers including *torii* gate [*sic*] and the tree spirits of *kodama* to send his messages in allegorical ways. (Okuyama 2015: 122)

Some of these scholarly claims are internally inconsistent. Others are frustratingly unclear. Collectively, they suggest that animism is a useful category for understanding animated film in a way that religion is not, presumably because Japanese directors and audiences are notoriously allergic to the category of religion. Some of these authors go a step further, arguing that non-Japanese audiences cannot understand Japanese films because they cannot connect with the intuitive "animistic" epistemology purportedly shared by all Japanese (Ogihara-Schuck 2014; Okuyama 2015: 170–172). Such ethnocentric claims make films into inert vehicles that transmit timeless cultural values to passive audiences, obscuring the ways that directors and audiences interpret films according to their own historical circumstances. These appeals to hoary tradition mask the politics of the present.

The Politics of "Animism" versus "Animist Politics"

There is no shortage of scholarly analysis that takes the existence of spirits in anime as evidence of "animism" in contemporary Japan. Indeed, some authors have argued that Japan provides a perfect case for putting to work the insights of Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory (Latour 2005) and/or the "new animism" literature generated by anthropologists such as Tim Ingold, Nurit Bird-David, and Eduardo Vivieros do Castro (Jensen and Blok 2013). In such arguments, Japan exemplifies the fusion of spirits and technology, with robotic pets, memorials for laboratory animals, amulets for scientific equipment, and Miyazaki Hayao's anime serving as examples of Japan's "techno-animism" (Allison 2006: 9–14).

Yet as Darryl Wilkinson has argued in a compelling article critiquing the "new animism" literature and the related concept of "relational ontology," the concept of animism as used in the contemporary humanities and social sciences describes the dispositions and epistemologies of secular humanists far better than it describes the

ideas or practices of ancient or indigenous peoples (Wilkinson 2017). While the concept of animism fell out of vogue in the twentieth century as anthropologists and scholars of religion recognized its supercilious conceits and imperialist overtones, the rise of environmentalist critique in the last decades of that century prompted some anthropologists to embrace the term once again as a way of recuperating connections with the natural world that had purportedly been lost. Indigenous peoples could teach secular humanists a thing or two about how to be at one with the world, and animistic thinking could serve as a way to repair humanity's fractured relationship with nature in the time now known as the Anthropocene. Wilkinson also shows that while proponents of relational ontology have been quick to embrace animism, they have not been so quick to embrace the related concept of fetishism, which describes the attribution of agency to particular objects. Wilkinson furthermore argues that proponents of the new animism have made a category mistake by treating native claims about the personhood of inanimate objects as claims about *persons* and *objects*, when in fact indigenous claims operate in a different metaphorical register and only *appear to be* making claims like "that rock is a person" (Wilkinson 2017). I will come back to this point when discussing the specter of the "real animist" below.

Three Types of "Animism"

Taking inspiration from Wilkinson's first and third points, I want to disambiguate "animism" by disaggregating what I see as three distinct uses of it in the scholarly literature on anime. The classical anthropological understanding of animism, as the belief that spirits reside in objects and nature, is decidedly *not* the understanding that scholars bring to bear when they say that anime directors connect Japanese and global audiences with Japan's animistic traditions. Upon investigation, "animism" is not particularly useful as an analytic term not only because it originally represented a supercilious distinction between "primitive" and "advanced" religion (what I call "pejorative animism"), but also because it reflects a late capitalist, Anthropocene-era politics that sees connections between humans and an externalized and romanticized Nature as woefully attenuated (I call this "recuperative animism").[2]

The situation is further complicated because many proponents of the idea that anime and animism are related seem to deploy the term precisely because of its mystifying quality. Describing a film or its reception as "animistic" allows the observer to imply that something meaningful is taking place, but the term simultaneously suggests that the event in question is resistant to rational description. I call this "obscurantist animism," and I operate on the assumption that it functions primarily as an apologetic strategy that places a particular intellectual position beyond critique.

To be clear, all three of the above are redescriptive categories. I am not particularly concerned with whether animists "actually" exist in the world, but I *am* concerned with the language politics of adopting the adjective "animist" to describe an epistemology, an attitude, or an identity. In other words, I want to explore *who* describes *whom* or *what* as animist and *why*. Near the end of this chapter, it will therefore be necessary to proffer a fourth term, "real animism," as a rhetorical foil that can be used to clarify

the stances of the proponents of "animism" in the three senses mentioned immediately above. I do not think that "real animism" exists (the same is true for "real religion"), but I find it helpful to explore how competing interest groups deploy the idea of authenticity in support of their claims.

Intriguingly, whereas the now-outmoded *pejorative animism* approach described premodern Japanese ritual practices and intellectual orientations as benighted or confused, what I call *recuperative animism* celebrates ancient Japanese epistemology (whatever that is) as a panacea for contemporary ills such as social alienation, crass consumerism, and environmental degradation. While I am personally very sympathetic to the causes of mitigating the impacts of global climate change, reducing pollution, preserving biodiversity, fostering solidarity between humans, and rendering relationships between humans and nonhumans as noninstrumentalist as possible, I find it odd that professional observers would turn to an "animistic" tradition to solve contemporary problems characteristic of capitalistic excess and environmental degradation. In the case of *obscurantist animism*, this invented tradition comes to serve as part of a nationalistic project that curiously renders Japanese "animism" as both crucial for the survival of the human species as a whole and as solely intelligible to those who are born Japanese (Reitan 2017).

At any rate, when scholars, anime directors, cultural critics, and audience members use the term "animism" to describe how directors create compelling illustrated worlds and how audiences interact with them, they ironically reinforce the divide between humans and nonhumans that they presumably intend to problematize. On close investigation, the very media that supposedly bind audiences to their "animistic" cultural roots through portrayals of humans interacting with spirits, deities, and the natural world turn out to actually *reinforce* the notion that humans are forever sundered from nature. Anime that supposedly depict a communitarian, eco-friendly utopia actually illustrate a fall from grace. Moreover, the worlds depicted in anime are, of course, hardly "natural." They are produced through a combination of technologies and artificial mediating agents (cameras, ink, celluloid, computers, screens, Blu-ray discs, theaters) that are quite distant from—although of course not unrelated to—the "natural" world of things like soil, water, and sunshine. Furthermore, the word "animism" has no indigenous equivalent in the Japanese language: it is exclusively rendered in the *katakana* syllabary reserved for foreign loan words. Animism is an "invented tradition" if ever there was one.

Spirit/Medium

By describing anime as repositories of classical religious information and as transmitters of ancient epistemologies, scholarship on anime tends to hypostatize an ancient substratum of cultural knowledge and/or practice which directors and audiences can tap into through film. Focusing on the presence of spirits in film, most of the authors I cited above overlook aspects of the anime medium that would seem to support their points: they describe spirits as diegetic characters, but the technical wizardry required to bring those spirits to life receives no attention. They seem concerned with the power

of anime to preserve animistic worldviews, but they eschew discussing whether an "animistic" disposition is best described as a worldview at all. By focusing on content and characters, their arguments also tend to leave out how anime can serve as a *model for behavior* and how the *medium itself becomes agentive* (directors' tools can themselves be mediators and agents; see Latour 2005). This focus on narrative content is ironic, given that an "animistic" approach would presumably recognize the agency—even the personhood—of apparatuses such as multiplane cameras, screens, and cables that directors use to make anime. With this in mind, in this section I offer a nonexhaustive typology of ways we might approach the spirits and the medium of anime as a way of setting up further discussion of whether anime really have anything to do with "animism" at all.

The storehouse

What I call the "storehouse paradigm" treats deities and spirits as entities that storytellers draw from a common repertoire of religious vocabulary and imagery (Kimbrough and Glassman 2009). This approach traces the spirits of anime back to their original sources in folklore and myth, showing that contemporary entertainment keeps Japanese audiences in touch with premodern traditions (Hirafuji 2007). For example, in the 1994 anime *Heisei tanuki gassen pom poko* (*Pom Poko* hereafter), director Takahata Isao reproduced medieval picture scrolls and paintings such as the *Hyakki yagyō emaki* (Night Parade of Myriad Goblins) and the *Amida shōju raigō zu* (Arrival of Amida and Retinue to Greet the Deceased) in a story featuring the trickster characters of the *tanuki* and the fox that feature in Japanese folklore (Ortabasi 2013).

The database

Another paradigm treats characters as fungible entities that can be exchanged at will according to creator whim and viewer preference. Building on previous work by Ōtsuka Eiji (2010) that argued that manga and anime fans are drawn not so much to grand narratives but, rather, to smaller bits of information that can create a larger narrative world when juxtaposed with one another, Azuma Hiroki has argued that audience members tend to be attracted not to *characters* but, rather, to specific *character attributes* (Azuma 2009: 25–62). Similarly, Ian Condry has shown that anime directors and artists begin making series not by developing *plots* but, rather, by establishing *worlds* (Condry 2009, 2013). Anime creators select characters based on their appealing attributes such as physical attractiveness, magical powers, and so forth. The appearance of spirits in anime is therefore less about directors "having something to say" about numinous entities than it is about creatively finding new ways to capture audience attention.

One example of this *database paradigm* is *Hōzuki's Coolheadedness*, an anime series that features the trials and tribulations of Hōzuki, a competent functionary in Japan's inefficient infernal bureaucracy. The 2015 anime series directed by Kaburaki Hiro pulls together various deities and spirits from Japan's robust narrative tradition of hell tours and folklore for comedic effect (on hell tours, see Kimbrough 2006; Hirasawa 2008). Replete with puns and irreverent portrayals of classical religious figures, *Hōzuki's Coolheadedness* depicts hell as hilarious.

The model

Both the storehouse and database paradigms show that characters or character attributes can be deployed or remixed for the purposes of telling a compelling story. But neither really addresses an assumption shared by many of the authors cited above, namely that anime films and television series prompt changes in audience behavior or reinforce deep-seated cultural beliefs. This oversight is perplexing, especially because there is a surfeit of data showing that viewers of anime frequently treat animated worlds as contiguous with, if not identical to, empirical reality. For example, some fans dress up as fictional characters (cosplay), and some travel to locales that are the real-world inspirations for illustrated settings (Buljan and Cusack 2015: 181–208; Seaton and Yamamura 2014). Fans' illustrated votive plaques can change the appearance of shrine grounds (Andrews 2014), and fan "contents tourism" has changed the economic fortunes of otherwise struggling communities (Yamamura 2014). Such examples show that anime not only foster changes in outlook but also elicit changes in behavior that have "real world" effects.

The medium

Because the authors cited above seem to be interested in how anime can create animistic outlooks, it behooves us to pay attention to embodied practices such as cosplay and contents tourism. But how is this sort of behavior even possible? What would make audiences commit themselves so fully to illustrated worlds? In a previous publication I used the animation technique of compositing as a metaphor for how audiences imaginatively superimpose spiritual worlds and illustrated settings onto empirical reality (Thomas 2012). Briefly, by breaking apart components of an image into layers (foreground, middle layers of varying depths, background) and by applying these layers to different cels that can be manipulated independently, cel animators are able to give animated film a sense of three-dimensional depth. Depth is revealed rather than penetrated: layers slide away to show distant backdrops (Lamarre 2006). Motion also looks different in cel animation, as does perspective (Bolton 2014). Rather than showing objects moving through space, cel animation shows spaces moving around objects.

I mention these technical aspects of the anime medium because I think that they draw attention to a simple but crucial point: if anime have anything to do with "animism," then we should not just focus on narrative content. Rather, we should see how the apparatus used for making animated films works on and through audiences and directors. We should note how audiences respond by imaginatively superimposing illustrated worlds on top of existing topography. We should furthermore assume that anime are not "spiritual" because spirits feature as characters but because *the apparatus used to make them could itself be possessed.*

Anime Animism?

It is now time to turn to the relationship between anime and animism in earnest, using several recent works to highlight what I think observers are seeing when they

describe anime as animistic. I use one televised series (*Mushi-shi*, dir. Nagahama, aired 2005–2006), one award-winning animated short film (*Tsukumo*, dir. Morita 2013), and a 2016 smash hit (*Kimi no na wa.*, dir. Shinkai) to illustrate my points. These anime show how widespread the "nature spirits" trope is, but they also show that even though spirits appear in anime in a wide variety of ways, anime are not necessarily "animistic."

Mushi-shi (2005–2006)

In a series of loosely related stories featuring the wandering master of eerie phenomena, Ginko, director Nagahama Hiroshi's series *Mushi-shi* depicts a world in which humans interact with elemental beings called *mushi* 蟲. *Mushi* are neither plant nor animal. They are sometimes visible, sometimes not. They can grant humans mysterious powers, but they can also cause unimaginable suffering. In the softly lit opening sequence, the unadulterated acoustic guitar of the theme song (Ally Kerr's "The Sore Feet Song") accompanies rotoscoped images of photorealistic trees that fade into a soothing, abstract green background as a slight phase effect warps the final notes of Kerr's arpeggiated chords. Nagahama's direction also reinforces the notion that viewers are close to nature. Panning shots track panoramic views of mountains and valleys. Close-ups focus on drops of water on leaves. Sound effects indicate a faint rustling in the underbrush or an unusual ripple in the water. The audience follows the protagonist Ginko as he walks through a world that is awe-inspiring and nevertheless subject to his expert gaze.

Is *Mushi-shi* animist? Each episode features an expository section in which Ginko explains to an interlocutor (and therefore to the audience) a specific type of *mushi* that is responsible for an eerie phenomenon. Swamps wander through forests (Episode 5, "The Traveling Swamp"). The character 鳥 (*tori*, bird) flaps its wings and flies off a page (Episode 1, "The Green Seat"). The same girl ages, dies, and is reborn day after day (Episode 6, "Those Who Inhale the Dew"). Ignorant humans worship *mushi* as deities or fear them as ghosts.

Ginko explains these elemental life-forms to his interlocutors in matter-of-fact terms. For example, in "The Green Seat," he describes *mushi* to the boy Ioroi Shinra as follows:

Ginko [T]hese [apparitions that you can see] are all *mushi*.
Shinra *Mushi*?
Ginko Yeah, you can distinguish them from insects and reptiles. Generally speaking, it's like this.
Ginko points to his hand.
Let's say that these four fingers represent all animal life, and your thumb represents plant life. If we say so, then humans are here, at the point farthest from your heart near the tip of your middle finger. The farther you go down your palm from there, the lower the life forms become. And as you go lower, your blood vessels combine into one near your wrist, right?
Shinra Yeah.
Ginko Fungi and microorganisms would be here. Once you get to that point, it becomes difficult to distinguish between plant and animal life. But there is still life far past that point.

Ginko traces his thumb up his forearm.

Go up your arm, past your shoulder, and the beings that are around here (*Ginko's thumb rests on his chest*) are called *mushi*, or, alternatively, "the green ones." They are similar to life itself. Because they are so close to life itself, their shapes and existence are ambiguous. Some have the quality of being visible, and others do not.

Shinra Yeah. Some are transparent, like ghosts.

Ginko Many so-called ghosts are actually *mushi*, since some *mushi* can take on the appearance of humans.

Ginko Your grandmother was probably unable to see *mushi*. It's difficult to share a sensory experience. Just as it is impossible to describe the texture and feel of something to someone who has never touched it. (Nagahama 2005–2006)

These expository sections of each episode provide rational explanations for mysterious phenomena even as they subtly reinforce the notion that the actions of *mushi* surpass explanation. While technically the *mushi* are not spirits, Nagahama uses verdant backgrounds, haunting melodies played on hollow percussion instruments, and abstract images to reinforce the oft-repeated claim that "Japanese people believe that spirits exist in everything." *Mushi-shi* imbues the world with mystery even as it renders the mysterious comprehensible and comforting.

Possessions (Morita Shūhei 2013)

In Morita Shūhei's award-winning animated short *Tsukumo* (Possessions), a different sort of "animism" appears in the trope of possessed objects. The opening title card attributes to the *Tsukumogami Records* the following: "According to *The Miscellaneous Records of Yin and Yang*, after 100 years tools and other instruments will change, acquiring souls and deceiving people. These are called *tsukumogami*." For those in the know, this indicates that the film is a new take on an old companion tale (*otogizōshi*; see Reider 2009a, 2009b).

As the title card text fades out, the camera follows a traveling handyman as he takes shelter in a small hilltop shrine to wait out a fierce thunderstorm. Entering the ramshackle building to dry, he begs forgiveness of the deities and asks permission to spend the night after losing his way in the rain. Just as he begins to doze off, he suddenly finds himself in a new-looking Japanese-style room (*washitsu*) surrounded by a host of dancing umbrellas who gaze at him with plaintive eyes. A tiny frog hops around on the *tatami* and leads them in a chant: "Here, and there, use and throw away! If you get torn, you're useless!"

Recognizing the pitiable umbrellas' value, the handyman pulls out his gear and sets to work patching them up. A similar scene greets him in an adjacent room, where ghostly *kimono* apparitions claw at him until he stitches them up into fresh bolts of cloth. Finally, he enters a third room where he encounters a foul stench as a pile of refuse rises up and then swoops toward him in the form of a frightful dragon. Rather than losing his nerve, the repairman claps his hands in front of him in an attitude of

reverence and says: "You served us well until you were battered and broken. Your effort is appreciated." The trash dragon blows past the handyman in a loud rush, leaving him sitting alone in the tiny shrine. Stepping out into the morning sunshine, the protagonist glances down to see a freshly patched umbrella and a rich bolt of cloth. Striding down the hill to continue on his way, he holds aloft his fine new umbrella as the rich cloth sits like a multicolored cape across his back.

If there is a takeaway message in *Tsukumo*, it is certainly not the sectarian championing of Shingon Buddhism described by Noriko Reider in her analysis of the didactic tale on which it is loosely based (Reider 2009a, 2009b). Whereas the classic tale used the story of marauding "tool specters" to demonstrate the soteriological power of the Shingon sect and the relative weakness of other forms of Buddhism, Morita's short film focuses audience attention on the *tsukai-sute* (use and throw away) culture of contemporary Japan. The traveling handyman cannot bear to see beautiful materials go to waste, so he repurposes everything he can salvage. Moreover, he demonstrates an attitude of gratitude toward the worn-out objects, thanking them and respectfully paying them reverence when they have finally outlived their usefulness.

So is this "animist"? Morita's film features animated objects and suggests that viewers should treat the objects and implements around them with care. Certainly this seems akin to a worldview that sees objects as endowed with personhood. But arguably Morita's short reflects the politics of Japan's capitalist present more than it recapitulates the "animism" of the hoary past. The last shot reinforces the anti-consumerist message by panning out from the traveler to show the iconic cone of Mount Fuji, an abiding topographical presence that implicitly connects his experiences in the premodern past with the contemporary present.

The ties that bind

Shinkai Makoto's 2016 smash hit *Your Name.* (*Kimi no na wa.*) features two star-crossed lovers who periodically switch bodies: Taki is a nerdy and timid Tokyo high-schooler who cannot muster the courage to ask his coworker crush out on a date; Mitsuha is the descendant of a shrine family who is torn between the demands of tradition and her selfish desire to flee the countryside for Tokyo. Although the bulk of the film focuses on the trials and tribulations of the teenaged pair as they negotiate the hilarious problems engendered by switching male and female bodies, the story actually begins with shots of the two living as young, single professionals in Tokyo. Moving through the city's labyrinthine train system, they each yearn for connection:

> Once in a while when I wake up, I find myself crying. I can never recall the dream I must have had. But the sensation that I've lost something lingers for a long time after I wake up. I'm always searching for something, for someone. This feeling has possessed me, I think, from that day. (Shinkai 2016)

Most of the film takes place not in this lonely "present" but actually in the past when Taki and Mitsuha were teens. In the world of the film, spirits are the ties that bind these distant humans to one another across time and space. The deity Musubi (written with

the characters "to produce" and "spirit" 産霊, but homophonous with the verb "to tie": 結び) is the *kami* venerated at the shrine where Mitsuha works as a *miko*. Although the deity never appears in embodied form, Musubi provides the "magic" that enables Mitsuha's and Taki's body-swapping.

In an expository scene that takes place while Taki is inhabiting Mitsuha's body, Mitsuha's grandmother explains to Mitsuha and her sister Yotsuha the meaning of *musubi*.

Grandmother Mitsuha, Yotsuha, do you know "musubi"?

Mitsuha "Musubi?"

Grandmother *Musubi* is the old way of referring to the local guardian deity [*tochi no ujigamisama*]. There is profound significance in this word. Tying thread is *musubi*. Connecting people is also *musubi*. The flow of time is *musubi*. This is the power of the omnipotent deity [*zennō kamisama no chikara ya*]. The braided cords that we make are the work of the god, and represent the flow of time itself. [The threads] converge and take shape. They twist, tangle, sometimes unravel, break, and then reconnect. That is *musubi*. That is time.

The trio stops for a picnic, and the grandmother laughs as the girls share a cup of tea.

That is also *musubi*! Whether it be water, rice, or *sake*, when something enters a person's body and joins their soul [*tamashii to musubitsuku koto*], that is also *musubi*. So today's offering [of chewed-rice wine, or *kuchikamezake*, to the local deity] is an important custom that connects the god with humans. (Shinkai 2016)

This expository section of the film helps the body-switching, time-traveling aspects of the narrative make sense. Without addressing significant aspects of the plot that are best left unspoiled for those who have not seen it, suffice it to say that the inconvenience of switching bodies eventually gives way to intimacy as Taki and Mitsuha become concerned for each other's well-being. Their connection is attenuated, however, by the fact that the very magic that binds them also keeps them apart. At crucial points in the film they just miss each other, or one will recognize the other without being recognized in turn. Walking past a stranger on the street, they each turn at just the wrong moment. Is it her? Was that him? Who was it that I was looking for again? When the film draws to its somewhat predictable conclusion, the audience knows that the deity Musubi has served all along as the tie holding the star-crossed lovers together.

The Specter of the "Real Animist"

With the foregoing summaries in mind, my point that contemporary anime does not represent ancient animism should stand because of a simple fact. The *concept* of animism is always already dependent on an epistemological sundering of nature from culture of the sort that "animism" in the classical sense (what I call "pejorative animism") would never allow. Whether the anime in question depicts "nature spirits" (as in *Your Name.*)

or whether it depicts the "spirits of objects" (as in the 2013 animated short *Tsukumo*), the anime I discussed above all seem to treat the nature-culture divide as only *temporarily* traversable if it is traversable at all. Even if we were to say that audiences respond to anime by professing belief that spirits reside in objects, such a belief would certainly not be understood by its proponent as a category mistake (pejorative animism), nor would any behavior based on reactions to the film (such as pilgrimage) be easily categorized as "animistic" because audience members' behaviors would still take place in a world in which humans and nonhumans are regularly differentiated.

My point is that the very act of calling something "animistic" means that one assumes that the divide between humans and nonhumans is real. If we assume the existence of a "real animist," then we can assume that she would have no use for the category. A "real animist" would not recognize the term "animism," and she certainly would not apply it reflexively. Moreover, our "real animist" would presumably look past the narrative of a given anime to view the spirits in the medium itself. The screen, the power cables, the celluloid, the camera: all of these objects could capture the attention of a "real animist" as potentially being persons.

I am somewhat overstating my case for rhetorical effect. I do not deny that there are people in the world today who think of themselves as animists, nor do I intend to downplay the postcolonial predicament of peoples who have adopted the term "animism" as a way of defining and defending their traditions in a world characterized by the sundering of nature and culture, religion and science. I simply mean that anyone reading this chapter will always already occupy a world where that epistemological break has taken place. We cannot think ourselves out of it.

Academic approaches that treat films as sites for animistic practice therefore miss the point when it comes to describing the complicated relationships between directors, audiences, characters, settings, and empirical experience. The anime described above may all deal in some way or another with humanity's connection with nature and the spirits that inhabit the natural environment, but they all seem to assume a sharp division between humans and nature that needs to be rectified. Morita Shūhei's award-winning 2013 short *Tsukumo* may redeploy classic folk tales about possessed objects, but it does so in critique of unthinking consumerism, not as a celebration of an undifferentiated nature-culture. In sum, the spirits of anime are rooted in late capitalist modernity with its attendant pleasures and woes: urbanization and anomie, atomization and alienation, rampant material extraction and environmental degradation.

Pressing Pause

My modest proposal in this chapter is to jettison the term "animism." Granted, there is no real way for scholars to police how language is used in everyday speech, and arguably that is not our job. But we *can* be more precise with the language that we use in academic work.

The foregoing has shown that the fraught politics of the word "animism" militate against using it to describe animated films and television series. What I have called *pejorative animism* describes natives as incapable of distinguishing between humans

and nonhumans, suggesting that they make a category mistake by attributing agency and vitality to objects. By contrast, *recuperative animism* finds in animism the tools for combating the ills of our age: alienation, ennui, and environmental degradation. While this seems to be the usage preferred by the authors I cited above, it easily slips into the nationalistic project of describing Japanese traditions as uniquely apt for combating problems of global scale. In obscurantist fashion, it also uses the ambiguous language of animism to make claims that are difficult to verify or prove: How can we know that the existence of a nature spirit in an illustrated film definitively serves as evidence of a longstanding animistic tradition? What kind of animism are we imagining in the first place? Does it assume that humans and nonhumans are always-already separate? If so, does it not reproduce the problem of treating the material world as universal and personhood as particular, when in fact a "real animist" would experience things the other way around (Wilkinson 2017)?

Having now spent many pages tearing the concept of animism apart, I would like to conclude more constructively. In closing I provide alternative terminology that can describe how anime characters develop stronger interpersonal relationships through the salubrious mediating function of invisible entities, beautiful natural settings, and vivified objects. I think the authors I cited above are onto something, even if I disagree with them that "animism" is the best word for it.

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Pause for a moment. Think about yourself on a crowded city street. Can you look a stranger in the eye? Can you hold her gaze without looking away in embarrassment? Can you walk up to her and, against all of your deeply ingrained socialization, say: "Hey, isn't your name … ?" Can you experience *intimacy*? Can you enjoy true solidarity with other humans?

Pause for a moment. Who are you holding? On whom are you sitting? How can you structure your relationship with the nonhuman others around you in terms of *care*? Do you unconditionally want the best for them? What would it be like to know and feel that this book has its own way of knowing, its own way of existing in the world? Can you be noninstrumentalist in your relationships with nonhumans?

Pause for a moment. Can you see without cynicism? Can you embrace the unexpected? Forget, for a moment, everything that you think you know. There is a whole universe under a rock in your garden; there is a cast of thousands marching across your houseplant. There is magic around you if you know to look for it. Can you be enchanted? Are you prepared to live a life of radical *wonder*? Can you practice deliberate naiveté?

Intimacy. Care. Wonder. These are not fancy words or concepts. They are simple emotions and basic dispositions. To describe these things does not require cultural essentialist claims, nor does it require elaborate theories of epistemology and ontology. It is enough to simply say that our authors and the films they discuss all highlight a *cultivated vulnerability*: a willingness to eschew cynicism in favor of enchantment, awe, and togetherness. This is the spirit of the anime medium as they describe it. In the end, we do not need the concept of animism to say as much.