Compassionate Neo-Traditionalism
in Hosoda Mamoru's Animation Movies

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Abstract. Throughout his activity as an animation director, Hosoda Mamoru tackles important issues of present-day Japan – and of late modernity – with creative acuity and a keen sense of observation. From *Digimon: The Movie* and *ONE PIECE: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island*, in which Hosoda rehearses his directing skills in the field of animation by taking over popular and familiar elements from highly successful Japanese franchises and embedding them into a more mature and more profound context of addressing challenging topics, through *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* and *Summer Wars*, in which Hosoda finds his way into the extremely competitive world of the Japanese entertainment industry with original storylines and powerful characters, to *Wolf Children* with its complex problematic of single motherhood, *The Boy and the Beast* with its combined topics of runaway children, of absent fathers, and of loss of masculinity addressed in a raw manner, and *Mirai*, in which Hosoda carefully avoids delving too deeply into the disturbing child-rearing and education politics of Japan, he constantly chooses a narrative of comfortable traditionalism, showing both that he understands Japan's critical situation and that he does not regard it as his duty to offer alternative solutions, more in tune with the spirit of the 21st century.

Keywords: Japanese animation, late modernity, cultural conservatism, rigid traditions, cultural consumption

Introduction: Reframing Traditionalism

Among the Japanese animation directors born into the *shinjinrui* generation, Hosoda Mamoru 細田守 (born 1967) appears as the most productive, yet the most conservative animation director, with a remarkable power to depict difficult, controversial issues without getting involved into them or proposing valid solutions to those very issues. In this paper, I shall analyse Hosoda's animation works in the chronological order of their release, both as aesthetic manifestos within the framework of Japanese animation as a field of cultural consumption and an impactful medium, and as ideological statements, on the quest for an answer to the question "Why are Japanese creators so cautious in delivering alternative answers and solutions to the problems they describe in their artistic works?"

Hosoda Mamoru started his career as film director and animator at Tōei Animation in 1989, where he stayed until 2001; in parallel with his activity as key animator for several animation series and movies, during his time at Tōei Animation, he released *Digimon: The Movie* in 2000 and *ONE PIECE: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island* in 2005, after his return from a failed attempt of cooperation with Studio Ghibli in 2001-2002 for Miyazaki Hayao's animation movie *Howl's Moving Castle*. In 2005, Hosoda moved to Madhouse, where he released his next two animation movies, *The Girl Who Leapt through Time* (2006) and *Summer Wars* (2009), but after he quit Madhouse in 2011, he founded in the same year his hallmark production company Studio Chizu together with the Madhouse producer Saitō Yūichirō 斉藤優一郎 (born 1976), who had produced his two previous animation movies. Ever since, Studio Chizu has released Hosoda's last three animation movies: *Wolf Children* (2012), *The Boy and the Beast* (2015), and *Mirai* (2018).

It is no exaggeration to observe that, in all his animation movies, Hosoda Mamoru approaches the directing act as a proactive gesture of observing the world around him and then mirroring it in a creative gesture of what might be called "artistic redistribution": he takes over from the real world what he sees as relevant facts and events and

subsequently turns them into symbolical pieces of history [Bolton 2018, p. 53; see also: Bauman 2000; Grajdian 2008]. In the transformative process, he does not, however, allow himself to delve too deeply in the maelstrom of causes and effects as well as of alternative solutions to the official mainstream discourse. Instead, Hosoda prefers, ostensibly, the comfort of traditional solutions, even when they have already proven inefficient or detrimental. As to be shown further below, Hosoda's directorial attitude seems to be the norm rather than the exception within the framework of Japanese creators, who shy away more often than not from giving their own input on burning sociocultural issues or questionable economic-political trajectories. While censorship or lack of valid information are not necessarily reasons to be addressed, this kind of uncritically approaching the creative act seems to stem from a long tradition of observing without interfering, of analyzing without reaching any final conclusions, of redistributing information without commenting on it [Clements, McCarthy 2017, p. 121-122; Condry 2013, p. 95; see also Lamarre 2009]. Against the background of this aesthetic-ideological vision of the productive creativity, the current paper questions the validity of the passivity implied by Hosoda's directorial accomplishments at a point in time when the sensitivity and sense of justice engaged by powerful artists is painfully, immediately needed.

The Beginnings: Tradition as Cultural Standard

The beginning of Hosoda's career as animation director in Japan was marked by two highly traditionalist animation movies: *Digimon: The Movie* from 2000 and *ONE PIECE: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island* from 2005. Both animation movies are to be seen as apprenticeship works for Hosoda, under the careful eyes of more experienced senior directors and producers, rather than full-blown cultural products authored by him.

Thus, *Digimon: The Movie* was co-directed with Yamauchi Shigeyasu 山内重保 (born 1953) and is an American-Japanese film adaptation of

the Digimon franchize, produced and released by Tōei Animation and distributed by 20th Century Fox. The film used footage from the short films *Digimon Adventure* (1999), *Digimon Adventure: Children's War Game!* (2000), and *Digimon Adventure 02: Digimon Hurricane Landing!!/Transcendent Evolution!! The Golden Digimentals* (2000). Upon release, the movie received generally negative reviews from critics, but despite this, the film was a box-office success, grossing over $16 million worldwide against a production budget of $5 million [Clements, McCarthy 2017, p. 121-122].

Digimon: The Movie is composed of four episodes running over 40 minutes, deeply connected with the Digimon universe. The first episode – the *Angela Anaconda* short – shows Angela Anaconda and her friends line up to watch *Digimon: The Movie*, but Nannette and her friends cut in line and invite Mrs. Brinks to block her view. Angela imagines herself digivolving into Angelamon to defeat Mrs. Brinks and Nannette. However, the audience realizes they are in the wrong theater and leave. In the second episode – *Eight Years Ago* – a Digi-Egg appears from Tai and Kari's computer, which hatches and digivolves into Agumon. Tai chases Agumon and Kari out into the night, where a second Digi-Egg appears in the sky to reveal a Parrotmon. As the neighborhood watches, Agumon digivolves to Greymon to fight, but is knocked out. When Tai reawakens Greymon with Kari's whistle, he defeats Parrotmon and disappears with him. In the third episode – *Four Years Later* – an infected Digi-egg appears on the Internet and hatches into a Digimon that devours computer codes. Izzy and Tai are warned by Gennai, and Greymon and Kabuterimon enter the internet, but are overwhelmed when it quickly digivolves into Infermon, followed by hasty plot-development. In the final episode – *Present Day* – while in New York city, T.K. and Kari witness a battle between Willis, Terriermon, and a corrupted Kokomon who insists that Willis "go back", and so Willis returns to Colorado. Kari tips off Davis, Yolei and Cody, who head for Colorado and meet Willis and Terriermon hitch-hiking on the way. Willis reveals his history with Diaboromon and that the same virus has infected Kokomon, and they decide to restore the situation.

On the other hand, *ONE PIECE: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island* (ONE PIECE：オマツリ男爵と秘密の島), equally produced by Tōei Animation, is the sixth animated feature film of the "One Piece" film series, based on the eponymous manga written and illustrated by Oda Eiichirō 尾田栄一郎 (b. 1975). The animation in this movie is very different from the regular series, using the style often seen in Mamoru Hosoda's works [Clements, McCarthy 2017, p. 121-122].

The plot of *ONE PIECE: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island* starts off with the Straw Hats receiving an invitation to an island resort on the Grand Line run by Baron Omatsuri, and the crew travels to the island intent on relaxing and having fun. The Baron welcomes them to the resort and encourages them to enjoy themselves, but only after they complete 'The Trials Of Hell'. The crew is hesitant, but Luffy accepts the challenge. The Straw Hats win the first trial, but the outraged Baron demands they compete in another challenge. Luffy, Chopper, and Robin wait at the resort while the rest of the crew participate in the second trial. Robin questions Muchigoro, one of Baron's crewmates, about a flower on the island. Muchigoro mentions something about the "Lily Carnation" being at the island's summit before running off. Luffy and Chopper wander off, both meeting other pirates who had previously arrived and participated in the trials. Then, the adventures take off.

With lighthearted plot-lines and conventional stories taken over from the familiar universes of extremely popular animation franchises, both *Digimon: The Movie* and *ONE PIECE: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island* offer the laboratory conditions for visual experiments to test the audiences' reactions while simultaneously providing for the young Hosoda the directorial space to access and to understand his own visions and ideas.

Experimental Artifacts: Clinging on Tradition

Hosoda Mamoru's next two animation films – *The Girl Who Leapt through Time* from 2006 and *Summer Wars* from 2009 – provide deep insights into his developing pathway as a profoundly conservative

creator who does his best, at the same time, to grasp and to elucidate artistically the challenges of his own historical time. This occurs in two steps.

In the first step, *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (時をかける少女 *Toki wo kakeru shōjo*) (2006) appears as an animated science-fiction romance film produced by Madhouse and released by Kadokawa Herald Pictures. It is, generally speaking, a loose sequel to the 1967 eponymous novel by Tsutsui Yasutaka 筒井康隆 (b. 1934) and shares the basic premise of a young girl who gains the power of time travel, but with a different story and characters than the novel. At first sight, it might be perceived as an imaginative and thoughtfully engaging animation film with a highly effective visual design: a coming-of-age comedy drama with wild resources of inventiveness to explore [Clements, McCarthy 2017, p. 121-122; Lamarre 2018, p. 46-48]. There is real craftsmanship in how the film sustains its sense of summer quietude and sun-soaked haziness through a few carefully reprised motifs such as the mountainous cloud formations or the classroom still-pictures – and it does so in a soft-spoken, compassionate manner. (A few months before the film's theatrical release, it was adapted into a manga by Ranmaru Kotone and serialized in *Monthly Shōnen Ace* 月刊少年エース.)

The plot of *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* starts with Konno Makoto at Kuranose High School in Tokyo, who discovers a message written on a blackboard and ends up inadvertently falling upon a walnut-shaped object. On her way home, Makoto is ejected into a railroad crossing when the brakes on her bicycle fail and is hit by an oncoming train, but finds herself transported back to the point in time when she was riding her bicycle right before the accident. After entering the Tokyo National Museum to meet with Yoshiyama Kazuko, she explains to Makoto after hearing her story that clearly, she now has the power to "time-leap", to literally leap through time. At first, Makoto uses her powers to avoid being late, getting perfect grades, and even relive a single karaoke session for several hours, but soon discovers her actions can adversely affect others. Consequently, Makoto uses most of her leaps frivolously, to prevent undesirable situations from happening, which creates even more

awkward situations. But, in due course, events set up rightly, with time paradoxes turning into life-changing moments.

In the second step, *Summer Wars* (サマー・ウォーズ *Samā wōzu*) (2009) is a powerful animated science-fiction film produced by Madhouse and released by Warner Bros. Pictures Japan. The plot of *Summer Wars* evolves around Koiso Kenji who is a young student at Kuonji High School with a gift for mathematics and a part-time moderator in the massive computer-simulated virtual reality world OZ along with his friend Sakuma Takashi. One day, Kenji is invited by fellow Kuonji student Shinohara Natsuki to participate in her great-grandmother Jinnouchi Sakae's 90th birthday. After traveling to Sakae's estate in Ueda, Natsuki introduces Kenji as her fiancé to Sakae, surprising them both. Kenji meets several of Natsuki's relatives and discovers that the Jinnouchis are descendants of a samurai (vassal of the Takeda clan) who challenged the Tokugawa clan in 1615. He also meets Wabisuke Jinnouchi, Natsuki's half-great-uncle and a computer expert who has been living in the United States since stealing the family fortune 10 years ago. Kenji receives an e-mail with a mathematical code and cracks it. However, Love Machine, a virtual intelligence created by Wabisuke, uses Kenji's account and avatar to hack the infrastructure, causing widespread damage. Kenji, Sakuma, and Natsuki's cousin Kazuma Ikezawa confront Love Machine – and the "war" for the "survival of the fittest" starts. Kenji must repair the damage done and find a way to stop the rogue computer program from causing any further chaos.

More than anything, *Summer Wars* is a story about a social network and a stranger's connection with strange family: the real-life city of Ueda was chosen as the setting for *Summer Wars* as part of the territory once governed by the Sanada clan; it was close to Hosoda's birthplace in Toyama. Hosoda used the clan as the basis for the Jinnouchi family after visiting his then-fiancée's home in Ueda [Clements, McCarthy 2017, p. 121-122; Lamarre 2018, p. 52-55; see also Ōtsuka 2004]. Family drama mixes with virtual online action in the breezy and entertaining *Summer Wars*: it contains familiar elements, beginning with its bashful, moonstruck young hero, but it combines them in fresh, contemporary, and

dazzlingly imaginative ways; the film provides a social commentary on the differences between an "analog world" and a "realm of digital devices".

The more complex narrative lines and the developing design of the characters resulting in a ramificated architecture of *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* and *Summer Wars* reveal Hosoda's efforts to surpass prevailing directing models of focusing on static structures guaranteed to appeal to the audiences and, therefore, to secure high levels of success at the box-office. Instead, the dynamic tackling of plot-lines and of characters' construction in their respective inner worlds, flaws, disappointments, and insecurities included, turns into a sure-sign of Hosoda's creative approach transcending cultural consumerism towards a more profound and compassionate representation and understanding of the human nature.

Exploring Wilderness, Orchestrating Compassion

Hosoda Mamoru's next animation film, *Wolf Children*（おおかみこどもの雨と雪）*Ōkami kodomo Ame to Yuki* from 2012, follows a young mother who is left to raise two half-human half-wolf children, Ame and Yuki, after their werewolf father dies. In order to create the film, director Hosoda established Studio Chizu, which co-produced the film with Madhouse. Sadamoto Yoshiyuki 貞本義行 (b. 1962), the character designer for *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water*[1] and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*[2], was appointed to outline the characters for the movie.

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[1] *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water* ふしぎの海のナディア (literally "Nadia of Mysterious Waters"), directed by Anno Hideaki (Gainax) was a TV animation series composed of 39 episodes and broadcast in 1990-1991 by NHK, Tōhō based on a concept by Miyazaki Hayao. It was inspired by the works of Jules Verne (1828-1905), particularly by *20.000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) and the exploits of Captain Nemo.

[2] *Neon Genesis Evangelion* 新世紀エヴァンゲリオン, literally "New Century Gospel", was a TV animation series of 26 episodes, broadcast in 1995-1996, directed by Anno Hideaki.

Additionally, two novelizations and a manga written by Hosoda with art by Yū (優) were released by Kadokawa Shoten in 2012. *Wolf Children* was the second highest-grossing movie in Japan on its debut weekend of 21-22 July 2012, beating Pixar's animation release *Brave*, which debuted in Japan on the same weekend.

The plot starts off in Tokyo, where college student Hana falls in love with an enigmatic man. One night, the man reveals that he can transform into a wolf; nevertheless, the two move in together and later have two half-wolf, half-human children: a daughter, Yuki, and a son, Ame. Soon thereafter, their father is killed in an accident while hunting for food. Hana's life as a single mother is difficult; Yuki and Ame constantly switch between their human and wolf forms, and Hana has to hide them from the world. After she receives noise complaints and a visit from social workers concerned that the children have not had vaccinations, Hana moves the family to the countryside away from prying neighbors. She works hard to repair a dilapidated house, while struggling to sustain the family on their own crops. With help from Nirasaki, an old strict man living in the neighborhood, she learns to farm more proficiently and becomes friends with some of the locals. Along their daily lives, both Yuki and Ame learn to cope with their complex structure in the world, and to pursue their natural inclinations.

In *Wolf Children,* Hosoda's representation and visual analysis of single motherhood, both as a perennial issue and a social phenomenon in present-day Japan, is particularly powerful. In this train of thoughts, there are several problematic layers in Hosoda's tackling of single motherhood: firstly, the prevailing tone of judgment towards Hana for her decision to fall in love and then live together without getting married to a man she knows nothing about [Schäfer 2017, Suzuki 2008]. Moreover, her pregnancies add to a somewhat contemptuous moral attitude towards her lifestyle and her way of moving forward. Her partner's death – on the hunt, to be sure, but suspiciously anonymous on a heavy rainy day – appears as a "well-deserved punishment" for this young lady living her life outside of strictly regulated and sanctioned social norms. The resulting complications are part of this obvious

and still hidden judgmental attitude which transpires from Hosoda's directorial handling of the situation – surely reflecting the general atmosphere in (modern/contemporary or not) Japan. However, things start to shift when Hana decides to transcend her despair and misery and to courageously take her fate – and the fate of her two small children – in her own hands: she moves away from the simultaneously alienating and suffocating metropolis to the countryside, where she finds solace and support, human warmth and freedom. As the movie evolves, the initial contempt gradually turns into open admiration, which then again metamorphoses into tremendous respect towards Hana's steely commitment to her children and their wellbeing [Kristeva 1974; Eagleton 2000]. The inherent conflicts and misunderstandings are displayed as major opportunities for vulnerability and closeness, with Hana immersing into the worlds of her children and then rising above her own insecurities to find ways to understand and empathize, rather than tame or restrict, Ame's and Yuki's growth.

Secondly, there is the almost unrealistic representation of the metropolis and of the countryside as two sides of the same coin: present-day Japan and its contradictions, inconsistencies, ideological perils. In the overall-architecture of the movie, though, this static orchestration of human habitats appears as an important background for the characters' quest for solutions to unusual decisions – decisions which, if dealt with improperly for too long lead to calamitous life circumstances [Castells 1997; Luhmann 1996]. In doing so, Hosoda allows for a more explicit visualization of the characters' inner worlds and dialectical struggles rather than diverting the focus towards more general issues. Thirdly, there is the highly problematic approach to masculinity and the symptomatic absence of fathers from the lives of their children. In *Wolf Children*, the father's absence is symbolic: he is not human, anyway, and therefore does not fit in the world of humans. His death – again, a highly symbolic disappearance – is almost a necessity for the children to develop "normally" according to sociocultural standards; in the larger scheme of things, though, his absence is a huge delusion in a society which has long forgotten the necessity of healthy polarization between masculinity and

femininity in the creation and formation of the next generation, as well as of the society as a whole, and excessively relies on artificial models articulated by political discourses and the mainstream media [Azuma 2001, p. 101; see also Sugimoto 2013; Fuller 2007].

To be fair, *Wolf Children* had its difficult premises and therefore required complex approaches to represent the main topic and its alternative solutions. Despite a decidedly critical attitude towards the phenomenon of single motherhood – as well as of the circumstances which lead to this situation – Hosoda displays it with warmth and compassion, cautiously sending a warning signal: things can get out of hand faster than one would imagine; therefore, non-judgmental benevolence is appropriate, even if one does not agree with someone else's life choices. It is a transactional message in itself, nevertheless, and, at the same time, a powerful reminder to show kindness and acceptance to those less fortunate than us.

Masculinity, Fatherhood, and Love

As if counterpointing his previous films, Hosoda's next animation production *The Boy and the Beast* (バケモノの子 *Bakemono no ko*) (literally "The Child of the Monster") from 2015 focuses on fatherhood and masculinity paradigms in Japan – encompassing several historical layers hidden in the development of the main character – as well as on role-models available nowadays to boys and male teenagers in Japan [Lamarre 2018, p. 81-83; see also Allison 2013; Kristeva 1989]. Generally described as an animated action adventure fantasy film, *The Boy and the Beast* was produced by Studio Chizu and released by Tōhō. It tells the story of a nine-year-old Ren who has recently lost his mother. With no news of his father and refusing to live with his legal guardians, Ren flees into the streets of Shibuya. Ren steals some food and sleeps in an alley, reminiscing the aftermath of his mother's funeral. In the meantime, in the Beast Kingdom, the lord has decided he will retire in order to reincarnate as a deity and names two potential successors: the popular Iōzen, who is also the father of two children, and the powerful Kumatetsu,

who is lonely and lazy. The Grandmaster suggests that Kumatetsu find a disciple in hopes of inspiring him to succeed him. While wandering the streets of Tokyo with his makeshift companion Tatara, Kumatetsu meets Ren and suggests that the boy becomes his disciple. Though Ren is fiercely opposed, he follows Kumatetsu back to the Beast Kingdom out of curiosity but is unable to go back to the human world. As he watches a battle between Iōzen and Kumatetsu, Ren is impressed with Kumatetsu's persistence despite the lack of support from onlookers. When Ren cheers for him, Kumatetsu is easily defeated. However, the Grandmaster declares the actual duel of succession has not come yet. Taking Ren as a disciple, Kumatetsu gives him a new name, Kyūta. Their initial training sessions go poorly, but Kyūta realizes that he can learn from Kumatetsu by imitating him while performing his household chores. The boy gradually discovers that he can predict his master's movements and can dodge and move adeptly in combat. They soon begin training together. After eight years, the teenage Kyūta has become a distinguished kendō practitioner. Moreover, through his relationship with Kyūta, Kumatetsu gains his own following of supporters, including the younger son of Iōzen, Jirōmaru, who wishes to be trained by Kumatetsu. After a long series of adventures, Ren reconciles with his father and decides to live once again in the human world with Kumatetsu, who had sacrificed himself to save his disciple, forever residing in his heart.

The Boy and the Beast combines familiar parts to create a gripping, beautifully animated adventure with inventive storytelling to match its visual appeal, and has more in common with the "Harry Potter" series than the usual female-centered [Hayao] Miyazaki fantasy, thus turning into an entertaining coming-of-age adventure, on the one hand, and an excellent thematic exploration of fatherhood and masculinity, on the other hand [Takahata 1999; Wells 1998]. On a larger scale, *The Boy and the Beast* is a bracing tale of two flawed individuals who find the love and discipline they need to assume their rightful places in their respective worlds, and, at the same time, an action-packed buddy-film that strategically combines several of Japanese fans' favorite ingredients: conflicted teens, supernatural creatures, and epic battles –

an eclectic mixing of film plots and concepts into a mish-mash that seems original.

Hosoda's description and analysis of relationships of power, aggressiveness, and emotional suppression among men pay a huge tribute to his overall commitment to traditional values and hierarchies. For instance, he does not question at all the reasons for which Ren runs away from his officially appointed guardians after the death of his mother and for the absence of his biological father from the entire procedure. Later on, after Ren, who has now become Kyūta, finds his biological father, he is confronted with a rather weak-willed, insecure man, unable to stand his ground and serve as a valid role-model for his son [Allison 2000, p. 17-19; Žižek 1989, p. 127-133; see also Turner 1968]. Moreover, at least in the initial phase of their encounter, Kyūta takes over the role of an *ersatz* father for his own father, who is obviously overwhelmed by the obligations and emotional turmoil of seeing his long-lost son again. This phenomenon of "parentification of children" who find themselves in the position to parent their own parents is a widely known medical appearance of the last several years in all developed countries: an increasing number of children and young adults are forced into taking care of their own parents at an age when the roles should be definitely reversed.

Additionally, Kyūta's return to the human world and his final decision to stay in it are reminiscent of an existential vision which endorses socio-cultural immobility and discriminates against the cross-overs. Ren's early sorrow and loneliness are depicted with warm compassion; his refuge into the world of the non-humans (化け物, literally "monsters") is depicted as understandable and natural; his acceptance and training by Kumatetsu are described as solely inevitable rites of passage within the formation process of a strong, resilient personality. What Hosoda fails to acknowledge is the impact delivered by the contact between the two worlds and the necessity of communication and mixing-up of them, instead of a permanent segregation and separation [Rimer 1995, p. 19-21]. Falling back on visions of intangible uniqueness, ethnic homogeneity, and biocultural superiority so often encountered in Japanese

discourses on race, history, and the universe, Hosoda ignores the realistic denouement of the story-line in *The Boy and the Beast*, more in accordance with the challenges and the tendencies of current times: the quest, the longing, and the joy of embracing the unknown, rather than rejecting it after depleting it of its magical resources.

The Hegemony of Conservatism and the Dangers of Exceptionalist Propaganda

As if to confirm the perils of neo-traditionalism disguised under the progressive appearance of products of popular culture, Hosoda Mamoru's next animation film *Mirai*（未来のミライ *Mirai no Mirai*) (literally "Mirai of the Future") from 2018 brings into the spotlight the typical nuclear family and its apparent struggles in present-day Japan – with the all-too-comfortable solution of the return to gender roles and socio-cultural norms of times long gone. An animated adventure fantasy film, produced by Studio Chizu and distributed by Tōhō, *Mirai* tells the story of Kun, who is a boy born to an executive mother and an architect father. The family lives in a stepped house in Isogo-ku, Yokohama, that Kun's father designed around a tree, where Kun spends his days playing with the family dog, Yukko, and his beloved toy train sets. When Kun is four, his sister Mirai (Japanese for "future") is born, and he is happy at first when his mother returns home with her. But he soon grows jealous when his parents focus all their attention on her and has to be restrained from hitting her with one of his toy trains. He lashes out first at his mother, and then at his father when he becomes a stay-at-home dad working from home while his mother returns to work. After one such tantrum, Kun stomps off to the house's garden and, subsequently, he immerses into a series of cross-temporal adventures, which teach him important values of patience, self-restraint, resilience, kindness, and respect.

It seems that Hosoda was partially inspired to write the script for *Mirai* after seeing his then-three-year-old son's first reactions to having a baby sister in his life. While initially only cautious of the newborn when

meeting her for the first time, Hosoda's son threw a tantrum one day, jealous of the attention that his parents were giving his sister. Hosoda's curiosity with how his son reacted, and how he would adapt to being a big brother, prompted him to make the protagonist of *Mirai* four years old. In Hosoda's words, "*Mirai* is about how a family can change but always remains itself." The simplicity and colorful warmth of *Mirai*'s animation is underscored by a story with surprising – and profoundly affecting – impact and emotional resonance [Giddens 1992, p. 173-181; Brown 2010, p. 91-96; see also Bauman 2003]. It is, to be sure, an emotional resonance that defies its conventional underpinnings, while privileging moments of emotion over belabored story mechanics. *Mirai* might be regarded as both a gentler and potentially younger-skewing film than Hosoda's previous works, and as the work of a true auteur (in what feels like his most personal film yet) presented as innocuous family entertainment.

In envisioning this conventional family drama, Hosoda shows unexpected insights into the challenges attacking the nuclear family – in itself, a powerful invention of the postwar social engineers, on its way out due to unsustainable ideals and sociocultural dynamics – while simultaneously choosing to blatantly ignore the realistic solutions. This contemptuous attitude, so typical for traditionalist intellectuals posing as left-wing social activists or creators of products of popular culture, turns obvious on several levels: firstly, there is the outdated gender paradigm, with Kun's father being depicted as hopelessly clumsy in his role of the primary caregiver and Kun's mother appearing as exhausted after long, intensive hours at work and intensely longing for more time with the new-born daughter [Allison 2000, p. 56-58; see also McLuhan 1964]. Secondly, Kun's temper tantrums are somehow grating to sit through, as any healthy parent knows that such acts of selfish gestures, if tolerated, develop into anti-social attitudes of entitlement and narcissism. Thirdly, the film's daydream sequences simply do not feel like anything a real child would imagine; rather, they are carefully constructed fantasy images of what grown-ups should learn to think about the inner worlds of their own children. Eventually, even the film's overall theme – children are overwhelming before they learn how to control their emotions – is

only hinted at, never thoughtfully expressed: the idea that children are full-fledged humans, with their own thoughts and emotions, who exist outside of their parents' expectations and desires [Giddens 1992, p. 189-190; see also McQuail 1984; Žižek 1989]. This is, one might assume, a far too progressive manner to represent children and their relationship to parents. Accordingly, the parents' role is to observe and to educate the children in the spirit of independence and autonomy for a future in which they – the children – will be resilient, self-reliant citizens. As in *Wolf Children* and *The Boy and the Beast* as well, in *Mirai*, Hosoda Mamoru fails to see the real solutions being openly displayed by the society in its everyday occurrences, and instead favors a vision of life, family, love, parenting, and inter-generational dialectics glaringly reminiscent of anachronistic preconceptions related to these elements. While the aesthetic dimension of *Mirai*, like in all Hosoda's animation movies since *Summer Wars*, remains memorable and warm-hearted, his choice of a conservative message under the disguise of left-wing flavored products of popular culture turn them into questionable tools for reinforcing a *status quo* already on its way out from the stage of history.

Conclusion: Neo-traditionalism or Conservatism?

Throughout his activity as an animation director, Hosoda Mamoru tackles important issues of present-day Japan – and of late modernity – with creative acuity and a keen sense of observation. While his descriptions are realistic and deeply compassionate, he fails incessantly to suggest credible, insightful solutions which might disturb the audiences' mindset and/or the political establishment [Baudrillard 1983; Suzuki 2008]. In *Digimon: The Movie* and *ONE PIECE: Baron Omatsuri and the Secret Island*, Hosoda still rehearses his directing skills in the field of animation by taking over popular and familiar elements from highly successful Japanese franchises and embedding them into a more mature and more profound context of addressing challenging topics. In *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* and *Summer*

Wars, on the other hand, Hosoda finds his way into the extremely competitive world of the Japanese entertainment industry with original storylines and powerful characters: in the first case, the main female character undergoes a deep inner development on her intensive journey of initiation towards becoming a full-fledged grown-up, while, in the second case, the main male character finds himself caught in a complex video game threatening to infect and disrupt the real world – and his task is to solve the world-consuming danger.

These four animation movies are Hosoda's laboratory, in which he explores the possibilities, limitations, and fascinating dimensions of the visual medium, to be subsequently enlarged with the simultaneous depiction of the Japanese society from a critical, yet compassionate angle. In *Wolf Children*, the problematic of single motherhood is regarded as the inevitable consequence of an individual's unfortunate choice; Hana's situation is not a historically given circumstance, but something she had put herself into, by entering a romantic and then a cohabitation relationship with a man she knew nothing about. Like in many such morally questionable scenarios, the victim turns into the person to be blamed. Hosoda avoids such a unilateral, prevalent vision of single motherhood by moving beyond the victimhood itself and scrutinizing the way in which Hana faces the problems and then grows into a responsible, reliable mother and citizen. As a director and story-teller of animated universes, Hosoda transcends the blaming-the-victim attitude and looks for solutions by looking at the individual's resilience and commitment to giving the next generation an authentic chance to an existence lived on their own terms.

The same gesture of a compassionate, yet very ambivalent sense of observation appears in Hosoda's next movie, *The Boy and the Beast*: here, the problematic of runaway children, of absent fathers, and of loss of masculinity is addressed in a rawer manner, without the delicacy from *Wolf Children*. It is somehow understandable, given the fact that all main characters are male, and probably those supposed to feel targeted in the audiences are male as well, with their confusions, flaws, insecurities, which they do their best to hide, completely. It is

a brutal world of competitions and the-winner-takes-it-all mindsets, where belonging to the right family or having the right master can change one's destiny entirely. Ren/Kyūta learns this the hard way, and, upon the tardy encounter with his biological father, he is able to show up as a stable young man on his steady way into adulthood. Again, Hosoda's solution is one of agreeable conformism: Ren/Kyūta can and does choose, eventually, to stay in the world of humans, leaving behind those who have turned him from a scared, hurt little boy into a reliable, strong young man, while, symbolically, conventionally, carrying in his heart the spirit of Kumatetsu – his master and "adoptive" father, a lonely outsider, like himself, who moved beyond the limitations of his own caste and taught a lost little human the rules of survival.

In the same line of equivocally tackling the burning problematics of late-modern Japan while sticking to conservatory rhetorics, in *Mirai*, Hosoda carefully avoids delving too deeply into the disturbing child-rearing and education politics of the country, and instead presents a heavily ideologized image of an upper-middle-class family who tries to find its way out of the chaos after the birth of the second child. The elder child, Kun, develops all sorts of emotions and confusing thoughts, but they are clearly filtered through the mature vision of the movie's makers and lose their naiveté and candor in the process. Once again, the return to a re-assuring morale of the story is the obvious solution, not the more progressive attitude of a liberated couple – a CEO mother and a working-from-home dad – who understand the challenges and benefits which come with their decisions. In choosing this narrative of comfortable traditionalism, Hosoda shows both that he understands the critical situation and that he does not regard it as his duty to offer alternative solutions, more in tune with the spirit of the 21st century.

Like his younger contemporary Shinkai Makoto, Hosoda Mamoru observes with keen interest the social phenomena of his time and depicts them with warm compassion in his animation movies, without attempting to understand why humans make the choices they make and what valid alternatives there are, as opposed to traditional solutions enforced by the socio-economic *status quo*. It is a convenient attitude

which avoids ideological criticism as well as social responsibility and obviously reflects the attitude of a large number of creators nowadays, with political correctness as the moral compass and box-office success as the main target.

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