



# Democracy and Kinship in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

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## Abstract

This article argues that *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* provides generative openings for young people to imagine egalitarian political relations with non-human animals. At the same time, the film also reproduces the all-too-common image of the young monarch who almost single-handedly saves their people from destruction: an autocratic and authoritarian impulse that runs contrary to what a truly ecological democracy might look like. Nevertheless, I propose that educators might still use *Nausicaä* to help young people think through the politics of climate-minded media.

## Keywords

interspecies democracy, ecological democracy, authoritarianism, kinship, anime

It's 2024—a presidential election year in the United States. The vote in November was, as more than one commentator has noted, a referendum on the democratic process itself (cf Berman, 2024). While the nation faced another authoritarian threat to its foundational values, the entire globe faces another year of shattered climate records across all metrics (cf Dancer, 2023). Meanwhile, right-wing culture warriors continue to use schools as piñatas for their so-called moral crusade. For educators to teach either democratic values or the climate crisis is to become vulnerable to their cudgels.

In what follows, I want to suggest that discussing films that have not yet been politicized, such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, grant educators a safe opening to explore deeper and more meaningful ideological facets of the ecological and democratic crises. I find *Nausicaä* especially useful for this purpose for two reasons in particular: 1) its speculative world helps keep viewers from seeing it as superficially political (e.g. aligned with one of two dominant political parties in the United States), and 2) its depiction of an ecological democracy is incomplete: interspecies alliances on the one hand, an authoritarian government on the other. As educators analyze the film with their students, they can work together to arrive at a clearer understanding of what kind of world we all deserve: an ecological democracy, one in which humans maintain egalitarian relationships with both their human and non-human kin.

### ***Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind***

Set in a post-apocalyptic future, Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) depicts a world after anthropogenic ecocide. From the ashes of a once lush Earth came the Sea of Decay—a toxic jungle growing larger and larger, pushing remaining human societies into smaller and smaller pockets of land. Humanity's retreat allowed the Ohm—a species of giant insects—to have increasing range across the biosphere. In the film, most humans live in fear of both the Sea of Decay and the Ohm, but not Nausicaä, the titular heroine and heir to the throne of the peaceful Valley of the Wind. Nausicaä is more generous and patient than other humans. She works to build relationships with the Ohm. She actively studies the jungle. She is an optimist. But one day her work is interrupted when the neo-industrial Tolmekians invade the Valley. The Tolmekians plunder the Valley's resources to resurrect the organic weapons that first devastated the planet. Still, Nausicaä's careful study of the Ohm reveals their rhizomatic political system, allowing her to forge a cross-species alliance. Together, humans and Ohm buck their Tolmekian overlords and achieve a sustainable, egalitarian peace brokered by their ecocentric monarch.

I am not the first to note the political valences within the film and in its cultural reception. Writing about *Nausicaä*, Donna Haraway (2016) notes that speculative fiction like Miyazaki's offers viewers insights about how we should be living here, now, in our already "damaged world" and in so doing "keeps politics alive" (p. 150). To access

these insights, however, viewers must resist applying readily available platitudes about “saving the earth” (cf Gossin, 2015). Miyazaki himself expressed wariness of the film’s increasingly normative reception and cautioned against oversimplifying—and thus defanging—its ecopolitical message. Doing so, he argued, blunted the film’s actual critiques, transforming them into a greenwashed “government-approved Eco Mark” (Miyazaki, 1996, p. 391). For the film to be generative, then, educators must help students analyze the actual ecopolitical relationships it depicts. Below, I share two possibilities for analysis.

### **Kinship Relations**

*Nausicaä* serves as an excellent model for interspecies kinship relations. It also takes care to show the challenges to doing so. The film intentionally presents the Ohm as dangerous, uncharismatic, and unknowable. In fact, the first time an Ohm is seen it is actually not an Ohm at all. Rather, we see its exoskeleton—a hulking, monstrous husk with too-many legs and eyes like an enormous, wingless cicada. It gives you the heebeegeebees. But just as the seemingly fragile shell is in reality remarkably strong, so too are the Ohm more than they initially seem. As Nausicaä learns about them, she comes to understand that they communicate by changing eye color, that their social dynamics are rhizomatic rather than hierarchical, and that their rage—“the rage of the earth itself”—is caused when the Tolmekians abduct an infant Ohm. Empathetic, Nausicaä sacrifices herself to save the little Ohm. In return, the Ohm band together (literally) to resurrect Nausicaä—a gesture of gratitude that the young human queen sees them not only as sentient persons, but as political entities in their own right.

### **Eco-Authoritarianism**

Nausicaä’s political relations with the Ohm are egalitarian—not so much for her own human subjects. This power is her birthright. Nausicaä is the only surviving child of King Jhil, the Valley’s much beloved but ailing monarch. His illness, caused by the toxins in the air, has left Nausicaä in an outsized leadership role. The villagers constantly pester her for guidance and information. In fact, Nausicaä seems to be the only one in the Valley capable of doing any complex thought or skilled labor. She’s the only one knowledgeable enough to repair the windmills, fly the Valley’s only glider, and serve as

lead pilot on airships. And she's the Valley's only botanist—the film reveals that she has created a lab hidden in the castle cellars, where she has successfully cultivated plants long assumed to be extinct. But she keeps this lab a secret from the villagers, as if they can't be trusted to know this. Granted, Nausicaä is a caring, selfless leader, but her feudal authority is never questioned—nor is that of any other ruling figure.

The Tolmekians are also a monarchy, led by Princess Kushana—a perfect foil for Nausicaä. Whereas Nausicaä is pacifist, Kushana is militant. Whereas Nausicaä lives in relation with non-human nature, Kushana attempts to dominate it. Nausicaä has a non-human sidekick, Kushana has artificial limbs. And so on. This contrast serves, by extension, to juxtapose the peaceful, pastoral Valley—which, true to its name, is fueled by wind power—with the neo-industrial Tolmekia, whose battle tanks are fueled by carbon but manned by armored, sword-bearing warriors. And yet, both monarchies are absolute. There are no constitutive assemblies in either, no checks and balances. It seems that in the world of Nausicaä, humanity's political response to ecological collapse was to adopt authoritarianism and to two different ends. Tolmekians had a militant authoritarian in Kushana. The Valley had a caring, benevolent one. According to the logic of the film, if ecological collapse occurs, we should be prepared to choose between these two options—should we be so lucky as to have options at all.

### **Ecological Democracy and Education**

Despite its faults, educators can—and should—use *Nausicaä* to discuss ecological democracy in the classroom. While it may prove easy to articulate praise of the film's kinship relations, as well as critique its authoritarianism, imagining alternatives to the latter may prove more challenging. If this is the case, educators can take comfort in the fact that no one *really* knows what an ecological democracy will look like. In fact, Chantal Mouffe is adamant that democracy “must be reformulated in view of the ecological exigency” (p. 62). That is, we should plan on figuring it out as we go, and we should anticipate—and celebrate—disagreement. After all, democracy depends on diversity. If full consensus is achieved, differences are obliterated; full consensus in a democracy does not mean the full achievement of democracy, but rather its failure.

Using films like *Nausicaä* in the classroom allows educators to discuss democracy and ecology in ways that avoid labels that might draw the ire of outside

stakeholders (e.g. right-wing, authoritarian, critical thinking) but nonetheless inspire deep conversation about political systems. After watching and discussing *Nausicaä*, educators could extend the learning in several ways:

- Ask students to imagine themselves as one of the villagers of the Valley. What would be *their* experience of the film's crises? How is their experience different from that of the protagonist's? What would give them hope, anxiety, or fear? Students could respond from the perspective of these "minor" characters to explore how political agency (or lack thereof) relates to everyday experience.
- Let students design the Valley village in which they would want to live. What would a more equitable and collaborative society look like? How would shared governance work? How are decisions made? Resources distributed? How would non-human animals be represented? Assign students to different teams or committees to submit their own proposals, preferably based on research about already existing systems of governance.
- Ask students to read the story of how [Indigenous leaders of several Pacific Islands granted whales legal personhood](#). Ask students to identify the specific rights associated with personhood (e.g. right to movement, cultural expression, etc), then ask them to pick another species. If that species were granted personhood, what species-specific behaviors, cultures, etc. would be protected?

Over a century ago, John Dewey claimed that "[t]he very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered and rediscovered, remade and reorganized" (1937, p. 182). Herein lies an additional promise of discussing films like *Nausicaä* in the classroom. Not only do they afford young people the opportunity to practice critical climate literacy skills, but they also grant young people the opportunity to discuss, debate, attempt, revise, and practice enacting democratic values. Indeed: what better place than the classroom—those rambunctious, fraught, joyful, besieged, electric spaces where human beings come together in community—to realize Dewey's (1916) insistence that:

...democracy is more than a form of government; *it is primarily a mode of associated living*, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer [their] own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to [their] own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept [humankind] from perceiving the full impact of their activity (p. 101, emphasis mine).

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