Urban ecocentrism, multispecies violence and the anti-utopian lessons of *Princess Mononoke*

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This article argues that the main challenge for urban ecocentrism lies in the difficulty of translating ethically ambitious ideals into practices compatible with urban realities of conflict, scarcity and institutional limits. Hayao Miyazaki's film *Princess Mononoke* is read as a portrayal of the city as an infrastructure of conflict, in which human survival, social inclusion and ecological destruction are structurally entangled, and where animals appear as territorial agents rather than symbolic victims. By bringing this diagnosis into dialogue with contemporary normative proposals on urban ecocentrism, particularly debates on the political recognition of urban animals, the article advances an anti-utopian conception of the ecocentric city. It proposes urban ecology as a political practice of limiting violence rather than an attempt to achieve harmony, and identifies the management of ecological conflict, the containment of damage and the institutionalization of responsibility as minimal conditions for ecological habitability in contemporary cities.

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The ecological crisis manifests itself with particular intensity in urban space. Cities are environments of forced cohabitation between humans, other-than-human animals and technical infrastructures, in which political decisions and everyday practices produce radical forms of inclusion and exclusion (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013; Wolch, 1998). Urban ecocentrism must therefore go beyond the design of green spaces and the reduction of environmental impact, and critically examine the ways in which cities determine who is allowed to inhabit, who must adapt and who is systematically eliminated (Harvey, 2012).

Many proposals for ecocentric cities tend to be utopian, in that they imagine the urban environment to be a system that could be harmonized or perfected,

given sufficiently widespread ethical consensus and subjects willing to reorient their behaviours. This article adopts a different, non-utopian, position. It argues that the main obstacle to a practicable urban ecocentrism lies not in the moral realm, but in the structural difficulty of governing ecological conflict within real urban contexts marked by power asymmetries, material constraints and deeply ambivalent subjects (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

To articulate this position, the article draws on Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and its radically anti-utopian representation of the city – as an industrial space in which human survival, social inclusion and ecological destruction are deeply intertwined, and in which animals do not appear as symbols or passive victims, but as territorial forces resisting urban expansion (Napier, 2006; Lamarre, 2009). In *Princess Mononoke*, the city is not a moral project to be perfected, but an infrastructure of conflict in which every form of cohabitation entails losses, compromises and irreversible violence. It is precisely this absence of reconciliation that makes the film particularly relevant for a non-idealized ecocentric reflection: urban ecology emerges here not as equilibrium, but as the imperfect management of fundamentally incompatible relations (Yoneyama, 2018).

The city as an infrastructure of conflict

In *Princess Mononoke*, the city never appears as a site of ecological harmonization, but rather as a material infrastructure that organizes conflict between human survival, environmental exploitation and non-human resistance. Tatara-ba (Iron Town) is neither a symbolic city nor a mere narrative backdrop: it is a fully functioning urban device, grounded in extraction, production and the transformation of territory. Its existence depends on a direct and violent relationship with the surrounding environment, which is progressively deforested, perforated and reconfigured in order to sustain the city's economy.

However, the film explicitly rejects any simplistic dualism between 'bad city' and 'good nature'. Tatara-ba is also a space of social inclusion: it accommodates marginalized subjects, provides labour, security and a minimal form of welfare. Ecological destruction is therefore not presented as an act of pure greed, but as the material cost of an urban project aimed at protecting human beings in a hostile context. In this sense, the city embodies a structural tension typical of real urban environments, in which the inclusion of some is achieved through the radical exclusion of others, both human and other-than-human (Harvey, 2012; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013).

Animals and forest spirits in the film do not assume the role of passive victims or symbolic figures of an offended nature. They occupy territory, exercise force and defend boundaries. Their opposition to urban expansion is not moral, but spatial and material. The city, in turn, responds not through mediation, but through policies of elimination: hunting, extermination and the systematic destruction of habitat. This dynamic renders visible an aspect often marginalized in discussions of urban ecology: the management of the non-human as a problem of security and territorial order, rather than as an abstract ethical issue (Wolch, 1998; Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005).

The character of Lady Eboshi concentrates this ambivalence in an emblematic way. Far from being a purely antagonistic figure, Eboshi represents a form of urban rationality oriented towards the protection of her inhabitants, even at the cost of escalating ecological violence. Her project is not to destroy nature as a principle, but to secure stability and autonomy for the city. For this reason, *Princess Mononoke* rejects a moralistic reading of conflict: there is no solution capable of fully preserving both the city and the surrounding ecosystem. Every choice entails an irreversible loss that cannot be compensated or neutralized (Napier, 2006; Yoneyama, 2018).

This absence of a final reconciliation is one of the film's most significant contributions to a non-utopian ecocentric reflection. Destruction is not healed, animals are not reintegrated into a harmonious order, and the city does not suddenly transform into an ecologically just space. What emerges instead is a wounded city, forced to recognize the limits of its expansion without being able to erase the consequences of its actions. Urban ecology, in this scenario, does not coincide with balance, but with an awareness of damage and with the necessity of inhabiting a compromised territory (Gandy, 2014).

Read from this perspective, *Princess Mononoke* does not propose a model of an ecocentric city to be emulated, but dramatizes the material conditions that make such a model difficult to realize. The city appears as a field of forces in which multispecies cohabitation is not the outcome of ethical consensus, but the unstable product of conflicts, resistances and political decisions. It is precisely this anti-utopian representation that makes the film a fertile point of departure for interrogating contemporary proposals of urban ecocentrism, not in order to celebrate or reject them, but to measure them against the material realities of existing cities (Lamarre, 2009).

In this sense, *Princess Mononoke* functions as a device of disenchantment. It shows that the urban ecological question cannot be resolved through absolute moral imperatives or through utopian images of total reconciliation between humans and non-humans. Rather, it calls for a reflection on the governance of conflict, the distribution of ecological costs and the possibility of limiting violence without pretending to eliminate it altogether. It is on this terrain, marked by incompleteness and loss, that it becomes possible to ask, in a realistic way, what it means to render a city ecologically inhabitable.

One of the main difficulties of urban ecocentrism emerges when the protection of the non-human is formulated in terms of absolute imperatives. In urban space, where divergent interests, material constraints, and ambivalent subjects coexist, models grounded in ecological purity or total reconciliation tend to produce counterintuitive effects: normative rigidity, social resistance, and, paradoxically, new forms of exclusion (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

As *Princess Mononoke* shows, the problem is not an excess of attention to the non-human, but the inability to govern ecological conflict without immediately transforming it into elimination or utopia. A practicable urban ecocentrism does not require morally perfect cities, but cities capable of recognizing limits, distributing ecological costs and reducing violence without pretending to erase it altogether (Harvey, 2012).

Urban animals and the politics of cohabitation

The representation of animals in *Princess Mononoke* makes visible a dynamic that is central to contemporary cities: when the other-than-human enters urban space, it is rapidly transformed into a problem of security, order or territorial management. Non-human animals are not simply 'other inhabitants', but presences that disrupt infrastructures, challenge boundaries and expose the limits of human-centred urban projects. The city's response, both in the film and in real urban practices, is often elimination: hunting, expulsion and the destruction of habitat (Wolch, 1998; Philo and Wilbert, 2000).

This dynamic is not limited to imaginary or historical contexts. In contemporary cities, many animal species – such as foxes, wild boars, corvids, rodents and insects – occupy interstitial spaces produced by urbanization itself. Their presence is a direct outcome of infrastructural transformation, yet it is rarely recognized as such. Instead, these animals are classified as pests, invasive or dangerous, and are managed through control policies aimed at restoring an urban order conceived exclusively for humans (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005; Whatmore, 2006).

It is in this context that several theoretical proposals have sought to rethink the relationship between cities and non-human animals in explicitly political terms. In particular, Donaldson and Kymlicka's *Zoopolis* (2011) introduces the category of *liminal animals* to describe species that live stably within urban environments without being either fully wild or fully domesticated. Their proposal to recognize such animals as *denizens*, rather than as parasites to be eliminated, represents a significant attempt to move the governance of urban animals away from the logic of extermination.

The primary value of *Zoopolis*, in relation to the diagnosis offered by *Princess Mononoke*, lies less in its full implementability than in its capacity to render politically visible what the film presents in conflicted form. Where Miyazaki depicts animals resisting urban expansion as territorial forces incompatible with the city, *Zoopolis* seeks to translate this incompatibility into a problem of citizenship, rights and governance. In both cases, the central issue is not the achievement of some utopian harmony, but cohabitation under conditions of permanent tension.

Nevertheless, the transition from symbolic recognition to the concrete management of conflict remains problematic. Real cities operate through unstable compromises, limited resources and subjects who do not necessarily share an ecocentric worldview. The risk, even in the most advanced proposals, is to presuppose a level of ethical consensus and cooperation that rarely characterizes urban environments (Swyngedouw, 2011). In this sense, *Zoopolis* functions less as a prescriptive model to be fully implemented and more as a critical device capable of interrogating existing urban practices.

Read in relation to *Princess Mononoke*, the proposal to recognize urban animals as denizens can be interpreted as an attempt to interrupt the automatic transformation of ecological conflict into elimination. The aim is not to abolish conflict, which remains structural, but to limit its most violent outcomes, reframing the presence of the non-human as a matter

of political responsibility rather than of purely technical or repressive management.

This shift allows urban ecocentrism to be reformulated in less utopian and more practicable terms. An ecologically inhabitable city is not one that achieves pacified coexistence among all species, but one that develops tools to recognize, negotiate and contain multispecies conflicts without systematically resorting to policies of radical exclusion. In this sense, the dialogue between Miyazaki and *Zoopolis* does not produce a solution, but opens a critical space in which it becomes possible to rethink the relationship between cities, non-human animals and ecological responsibility.

Towards a practicable urban ecocentrism

The preceding analyses suggest that the main limitation of urban ecocentric proposals lies not in their ethical ambition, but in the difficulty of translating that ambition into implementable practices for governance within urban space. Real cities are neither neutral environments nor harmonizable systems, but territories shaped by structural conflicts, material inequalities and subjects acting under a range of economic and infrastructural constraints. In this context, a practicable urban ecocentrism cannot be grounded in absolute imperatives or models of pacified coexistence, but must confront the concrete management of multispecies conflict (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

This entails a significant political shift: rather than demanding adherence to elevated ecocentric ideals, it calls for interventions in the material conditions that produce conflict. These include urban policies recognizing the stable presence of non-human animals, infrastructural arrangements mitigating the most destructive impacts of urbanization and management practices that accept a degree of disturbance as constitutive of urban life. Multispecies coexistence, in this framework, is not an individual virtue, but the outcome of collective choices and institutional compromises (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013; Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005).

A non-radical urban ecocentrism is therefore characterized by attention to limits – ecological, political and psychological. Cities are inhabited by ambivalent subjects who are often unable or unwilling to sustain excessive moral demands. Acknowledging these limits makes it possible to design interventions that operate through incremental adjustments and selective reductions of harm, rather than through total ethical conversion.

From this perspective, protecting the non-human does not require abolishing conflict, but politicizing it. Making visible the decisions that lead to extermination, marginalization, or expulsion shifts them from the domain of the technical into that of the political, and thereby forces recognition of the costs and losses embedded in urban ecological governance (Swyngedouw, 2011). Learning to live with conflict thus emerges not as a retreat from ecological ethics, but as its condition of possibility in contemporary urban space.

Habitable cities, not perfect ones

This article has brought into dialogue an anti-utopian representation of the city, offered by *Princess Mononoke*, with contemporary normative proposals on

urban ecocentrism. The analysis suggests that the main obstacle to urban ecocentrism lies in the difficulty of translating ethical ideals into urban practices that are compatible with conflict and material constraints (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

To put this another way, *Princess Mononoke* does not offer a model to be emulated, but a diagnosis. The city emerges as an infrastructure of conflict in which the protection of human life and the destruction of the non-human are historically entangled. Animals appear not as symbolic figures or passive victims, but as territorial presences that disrupt urban expansion and expose the ecological costs of political decisions. The absence of a final reconciliation allows the film to function as a critique of harmonizing visions of the city.

Normative proposals that recognize urban animals as political subjects – such as the category of *denizens* – represent an important step in moving urban governance away from the logic of extermination. Their effectiveness, however, depends on their capacity to engage with the material conditions and limits of urban governance. Ecocentrism grounded in absolute imperatives risks producing resistance and paralysis rather than transformation.

A practicable urban ecocentrism does not promise morally pure or reconciled cities, but cities capable of remaining inhabitable despite multispecies conflict. Rather than eliminating conflict, it seeks to reduce its most violent outcomes by making decisions affecting the non-human visible, contestable and politically accountable. Ecological protection in urban contexts thus appears not as a final state to be achieved, but as an ongoing, endlessly contestable and revisable practice of damage containment and responsibility-taking.

In the ending of Princess Mononoke, continued life becomes possible not through reconciliation between city and forest, nor through adherence to a superior moral principle, but through a fragile form of mediation capable of traversing incompatible territories without unifying them. This bridging function does not resolve conflict, but prevents its destructive escalation. Transposed to contemporary urban space, this suggests that ecological mediation cannot rely on exemplary ethical subjects or generalised moral conversion, but must operate as a collective and institutional practice of limiting violence.

The contribution of this article, therefore, is not the proposal of an ideal ecocentric urban model, but the identification of a minimal and necessary function: an ecocentrism capable of operating as a bridge between incompatible interests. As in Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*, survival depends not on the elimination of conflict, but on its containment, channelling and transformation into political responsibility. From this perspective, urban ecology does not coincide with equilibrium, but with a continuous refusal of annihilation as a solution.

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