

# MECHA AND KODOMO ANIME, POP CULTURE, AND MASS ENVIRONMENTALISM. FIRST NOTES ON THE TOP DOWN TRANSMISSION OF ECOLOGICAL IDEAS IN THE DECADES OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS (1960-1990)

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**di Federico Paolini**

## **Abstract**

L'ipotesi che sta alla base di questo articolo è che possa esistere un nesso fra il successo dei cartoni animati di consumo e l'affermazione dell'ambientalismo di massa. Lo studio muove dal concetto di mobility turn e dal fatto che esistono molteplici forme di mobilità immaginativa: una di queste riguarda le idee ecologiche per le quali possiamo immaginare un percorso che va dagli Stati Uniti (Carson, Ehrlich, Meadows, Commoner...) al Giappone e dal Giappone al resto del mondo sotto forma di storie animate. L'obiettivo è suggerire una diversa prospettiva per esaminare un tema complesso, nevralgico e divisivo come l'ambiente (e la sua declinazione politica, l'ambientalismo) inserendoli in un vasto contesto culturale e sociale.

## **Abstract Eng**

The hypothesis behind this article is that there may be a connection between the success of consumer cartoons and the affirmation of mass environmentalism. The study moves from the concept of mobility turn and from the fact that there are many forms of imaginative mobility: one of these concerns the ecological ideas for which we can imagine a path that goes from the United States (Carson, Ehrlich, Meadows, Commoner ...) to Japan and from Japan to the rest of the world in the form of animated stories. The aim is to suggest a different perspective to examine a complex, neuralgic and divisive theme such as the environment (and its political declination, environmentalism) by inserting them in a vast cultural and social context.

## **Bio Eng**

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ambientale (Milano, 2014)

## Bio

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### Where Engels and Thoreau could not, Grendizer and Heidi could?

The thesis of this article<sup>1</sup> is that there is a connection between the affirmation of mass environmentalism and the success of pop culture: The aim of the work is to suggest a different perspective to examine a complex and divisive topic such as the *environment* (and its political declination, *environmentalism*), inserting it into a global cultural context.

This research starts from some theoretical references such as Marshall McLuhan (1964, 1967), Jean Baudrillard (1982), Pierre Bourdieu (1996) and Giovanni Sartori (1997): the concept is that there was a mobility of ideas that started from environmental philosophy and political ecology to reach the authors of anime cartoons. The authors have made these conceptions their own by simplifying them in the scripts: in this facilitated form the ideas have arrived to the large television audience composed mostly of children and adolescents.

In turn, the public began to become familiar with these concepts and, in this way, began to approach the instances promoted by environmentalism. So, the idea is that Japanese anime have created a connection between the theories of environmental philosophy and political ecology and the mass imaginary. In essence, the success of Japanese cartoons would have contributed to the vulgarization of those concepts, favoring their penetration into the cultural imagination of the masses (Bartoletti 2001; Cross and Smits 2008).

The imagery of the children and adolescents of the 1970s and 1980s was deeply colonized by the television series aired at that time (Pellitteri 2018). It does not seem senseless to affirm that the closeness to the environmental problems of those generations (far more sensitive than their parents, raised in the myth of the economic miracle) is not due to the real knowledge of the terms of the environmental question, but to the fascination exerted on of them from those anime universes

populated by colorful heroes, robots, animals and pastel-colored landscapes.

The narrative rhetoric of anime is pervaded by continuous references to nature and the urgent need to protect it. For children and adolescents in the 1970s and 1980s (the first generation of widespread well-being), adherence to organized environmentalism appears to be much more linked to the emergence of an environmentalist sentiment conveyed by mass visual culture rather than in-depth readings of the *Dialectics of Nature* by Friedrich Engels or *Walden* by Henry Thoreau. In short, where Engels and Thoreau could not, Grendizer and Heidi could?

### **Three narrative universes**

The anime of the television golden age (the 70s-80s of the XX Century) can be divided into three narrative universes: The epic of robots; the fairy tale of everyday life; anime for children with anthropomorphic animals as main characters.

#### *Mecha anime: disasters and resource scarcity*

To the first universe belong the stories of the the fighting robots (mecha anime). The mecha series have a uniform narrative scheme (Ladd and Deneroff 2009, Nacci 2016, Nicora 2017): on one side there are the positive heroes; on the other, the representatives of Evil whose purpose is to subject the Earth to seize its resources and enslave the population. These are anthropocentric narratives, influenced by the myth of technological modernization and the geopolitical climate of the time, dominated by the cold war and the constant fear of a nuclear catastrophe (Pellitteri 2009). To understand the atmosphere of those years it is enough to think of the success of films such as *The China Syndrome*, directed by James Bridges in 1979 or *The Day After*, directed by Nicholas Meyer in 1983.

The storytelling has been influenced by 'steady state' literature and by 'limits to growth' debate: *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson was published in 1962; *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich and *The Tragedy of the Commons* by Garrett Hardin in 1968; *The Closing Circle* by Barry Commoner in 1971; *A Blueprint for Survival* by Edward Goldsmith and Robert Allen and the *Limits to Growth* report in 1972. The telling has been also influenced by the issue of resources scarcity and conflicts over their use: this issue became prominent after the oil price increases caused by the Yom Kippur war.

FIGURA 1  
Copertina del manga Astro  
Boy di Tetsuya Atom (Panini  
Comics, 2019)



At the center of the first series there was the relationship between man and technology (Sabanovic 2014): in *Astro Boy* (Mushi Productions, 1963-1966) the protagonists are science, nuclear energy and technology, considered the pillars with which to build the future of Japan. At the same time, the cartoon series (Eitj and LaMarre 2008, Gibson 2012, Gibson 2013) raises questions about the technological nature of Astro Boy (a robot with a sentient brain): can it be considered a living being or is it just a machine?

In *Astroganger* (Knack Productions, 1972-1973), the robot represents a metaphor for the importance of science and technology that hides the fear that they can come to control every aspect of life on Earth. The authors underline the risk that an excessive use of science and technology could transform man into a machine. In the *Mazinger Z* (Toei Animation, 1972-1974) series the role of technology is even more accentuated: in this anime it becomes the main source of power and a sort of divinity that man can make to be positive or demonic (Lunning and Freeman 2008). Before dying, the creator of the robot (Juzo Kabuto) tells his nephew and pilot of Mazinger Koji Kabuto that by using the robot he can turn into a god or a demon.

The *Great Mazinger* series (Toei Animation, 1974-1975) is still based on the technological dilemma: whether the technology is a positive or negative thing. However, aired just during the oil crisis, for the first time it puts the issue of energy at the center of the narrative. The series addresses the problem of clean energy, or the need to have a powerful, renewable and non-polluting energy source.

The *Raideen* series (Sunrise, 1975-1976) introduces a new narrative element: the “catastrophe already happened” that is a narrative expedient from which begins the narration that appears the consequence of a catastrophic event that precedes the events told in the anime. The catastrophe already happened is caused by conflicts over the possession of resources whose nature can be economic (possession of resources and territories...) or environmental (nuclear radiations; scarcity...).

The *Grendizer* series (Toei Animation, 1975-1977) is all focused on the problem of resource scarcity and the need to preserve the *beauty* of the Earth: the protagonist Duke Fleed-Actarus, after the conclusion of the most bitter battles, repeats to himself that he must do everything the possible to save the *marvelous* planet Earth and its *marvelous* nature. In the first episode the co-star Alcor-Koji Kabuto considers peaceful exchanges with alien peoples indispensable since the Earth “has almost exhausted its resources”. The protagonists of the anime want to prevent the Earth from being conquered by the people of Vega, an alien population that continually subjugate new planets because

on their planet the natural resources have been exhausted and the main energy (vegatron) is also going to run out.

FIGURA 2 **MAZINGAZ**  
Mazinga Z (The Original DvdZ collection, 1, Rcs Mediagroup, 2015)



At the end of the 1970s, anime introduced new topics such as those posed by the development of biotechnology and information technology. The *Daitarn 3* series (Sunrise, 1978-1979) puts at the center of the narrative the theme of dualism between the naturalness of man and the artificiality of the machines. Man is the bearer of the positive values of humanity, while the Meganoids (enemies whose nature is artificial) are carriers of the negative values.

In the *Daltanious* series (Sunrise-Toei Animation, 1979-1980), history is a metaphor for the damage caused by colonialism whose purpose is the exploitation of economic and natural resources. The story highlights the risks that can be caused by a dystopian use of biotechnologies. The *God Sigma* series (Toei Animation, 1980-1981) is aired one year after the second oil crisis caused by the Iranian revolution: in this anime the issue of the need for a clean and durable energy source returns. The clean energy obtained from the ionium is used for space exploration, but also as a weapon to combat alien populations. At the base of the story there is a strongly distopic vision of the future.

### *Nature as a fairy tale*

The anime cartoons that describe the fairy tale of everyday life are characterized by a clear dualism between nature and the anthropic world; by the repetition of the concept that nature must be protected and preserved and by the use of ecocentric narratives. The series represent a clear criticism of the golden age development model and, as far as Japan is concerned, of the Showa era (the reign of Emperor Hirohito).

In *Heidi* (Zuiyo Eizo, 1974) the dualism between nature and anthropized environment is evident: on one side there are the Swiss Alps where the Heidi's grandfather lives in symbiosis with the dog, the goats and the mountain; from the other the city (Frankfurt) with its indifferent landscape and the rigid social organization not without dullness (symbolized by the educator Rottenmeier). The message conveyed by the director Isao Takahata and the layout manager Hayao Miyazaki exalts the nature nature as a symbol of freedom and the true essence of life on Earth (Chute 1998). In the anime, nature is also represented as a thaumaturgical force: the contact with the uncontaminated and benign environment of the mountain helps Clara (met by Heidi in Frankfurt, in the Seseman house) to recover from poliomyelitis.

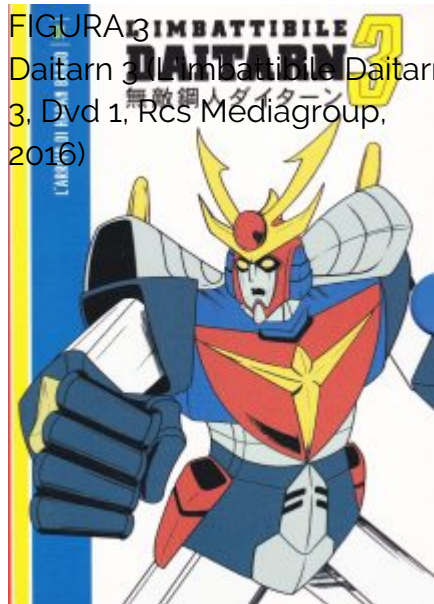


FIGURA 3  
Daitarn 3 Imbattibile Daitarn 3, Dvd 1, Rcs Mediagroup, 2016)

In *Conan* the dualism between nature and the anthropized world is even more accentuated: the good is represented by nature, by peasants and animals; evil is represented by industrial development and machines. The criticism of technology and industrial development is symbolized by the city of *Indastria* (characterized by the struggle for access to solar energy) where citizens are divided into castes and most of the population is exploited by powerful people.

#### *Kodomo anime: the anthropization of the animal world*

The children's anime are characterized by the anthropomorphism of the main characters, by the theories of animalism and vegetarianism and by ecocentric narratives (Hiroki, Furuhata and Steinberg 2007). The debt to the Disney tradition is evident and, perhaps, it is worth remembering that even the cartoons created by Walt Disney are born in a climate strongly influenced by the nascent environmentalism. In particular, the first protagonists of the Disney animation (think of the *Silly Symphony Three Little Pigs* of 1933 or of *Bambi* of 1942) appear to be influenced by "progressive conservationism", characterized by a rigidly dichotomous representation of the animal world: on one side good animals, to be protected (birds, deers...); on the other the bad ones (considered harmful: the wolf and the coyote, systematically hunted to the point of extinction).

In 2013, an article appeared in "Biodiversity and Conservation" (*Anthropomorphized species as tools for conservation: utility beyond prosocial, intelligent and suffering species*, 22, 1577-1589) in which the authors maintain that the anthropomorphization of animals contributes to improve people's predisposition towards conservation projects: this is because, according to the authors, people tend to relate positively with animal species in which they see similarities with human behavior. The other side of anthropomorphization is, however, a distorted perception of the natural world: the human qualities attributed to animals push people to ignore or underestimate their real behavior.

*Doraemon* (Nippon TV Video, 1973) is characterized by criticism of omnipotence of science that claims to solve everything, but creates unexpected events that cannot be governed. Instead, the goal must be to create a balance between man and technology. *Doraemon* authors want to promote coexistence among all living species and to criticize the industrial model based on the excessive exploitation of natural resources. In the episodes there are many pedagogical references to environmental themes that recall environmental issues: urban pollution, animals in danger of extinction, land use, energy shortages.



FIGURA 4  
Fotogramma tratto da Doraemon. Il film. Nobita e la grande avventura in Antartide (Luckyred Homevideo, 2018)

The influence of animalism and ecocentrism is even more evident in the anime *Barbapapa* (KSS, 1974) that has an admittedly ecological message influenced by the animalist and anti-speciesist philosophy. There is a strong dichotomy between good (nature in all its forms) and evil (anthropic development). The message is that all species have the same dignity and the same right to inhabit the Earth.

The *Maya the Honey Bee* anime (Zuiyo Enterprise Company, 1975-1980) proposes to the television audience the magic of the animal world. It is a pedagogical anime that wants to show children the importance of all living creatures, even the smallest and wrongly considered unimportant or harmful.

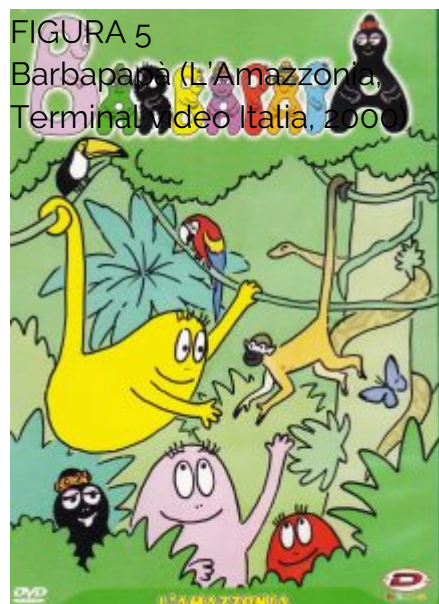


FIGURA 5  
Barbapapa (L'Amazzonia, Terminal Video Italia, 2000)

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