

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MYTHOLOGICAL *TANUKI* IN STUDIO GHIBLI'S *POM POKO*: BARTHESIAN SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Studio Ghibli's animated film *Pom Poko* presents the *tanuki* or raccoon dogs which, according to the Japanese myth, have magical power of impersonating human or shape-lifting. Mythology refers to the study of religious or heroic legends and tales created by particular communities or societies. Having the setting in the 1960s of post-war Japan, this animated film mediates the meaning of the *tanuki*'s moves in selected scenes. Therefore, Barthesian semiotic model is employed as semiotics itself is concerned with the film and its representation. This research is then aimed at finding out the representation of the *tanuki*. Employing qualitative method, this research selects six data in the forms of images to analyze. The results yield that the *tanuki* are the heroes of environmental conservation by struggling and using force for the sake of their environment, jungle, food sources, living territory, and future cubs. Their moves of defending nature represent their ecological terroristic ideology or ecoterrorism.

Keywords: *Pom Poko*; studio Ghibli; ecoterrorism; environment; semiotics; representation

1. Introduction

The world has collections of myths. The umbrella term for myth is mythology. Mythology refers to the study of religious or heroic legends and tales created by particular communities or societies (n.d. Oxford's Online Dictionary). Myth itself means a set of classical stories on early history of a group of people or about natural phenomena or reality in a certain society (n.d. Cambridge's Online Reference) Characters in myths are the gods, creatures with super power, super heroes, and mythological beings with other worldly power. Each character in myth is assigned human being's qualities. Each is a sign standing for some human idea, emotion, need, or human being's intrinsic reality (Danesi, 2020). A super hero, for instance, has universally accepted pattern being described as having psychological, intellectual, and physical skill (Wedhowerti, 2016). In other words, a hero possesses qualities that "non-heroes" may not. Accordingly, myths comprise oppositional notion, such as good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, and hell vs. heaven. Lévi-Strauss terms it an oppositional structure (in Danesi, 2020). Thus, to understand "evil", the explanation is in respect of "good" and vice versa.

The concept of heroes, "good vs. evil", human being's qualities, and super power in myths is passed down through generations. This concept is conserved in such a way and in

different form such as pictures and oral tradition that the next generation still holds the same belief and value. The conserving and transmitting process of the concept is called representation by means of pictures and oral tradition. The media (pictures and oral tradition) and representation are the primary concern of semiotics. The representation is, however, restricted. Social conventions and local or communal wisdoms are among those restricting the representation. In other words, representation is culturally-specific in nature. The meaning or signification of a certain representation varies globally across different cultures.

An example of this is the meaning of *Sita's* representation, the female character in the epic of Ramayana of Valmiki. One of its reproductions is the animated film *Sita Sings the Blues*. Table 1 below summarizes how people deduce meaning from two different *Sitas*.

<i>Sita</i> in most Ramayana Texts	<i>Sita</i> in <i>Sita Sings the Blues</i>
She is considered as an unattainable ideal	She is a more "realistic" model to emulate
She stays silent (or not given a chance and space to speak) in facing <i>Rama's</i> bad treatment, rejection, and banishment	She does something to face hard times and <i>Rama's</i> bad treatment and rejection by singing blues songs. Blues songs become her media (spaces) to speak up her mind
She does everything <i>Rama</i> tells her to do	She does not do what all <i>Rama</i> tells her to do, e.g. in the last scene, she chooses to ask the Mother Earth to take her back into her womb as a proof of her purity

Table 1. The Representation of Two *Sitas*

Source: Wedhowerti (2016)

Observing the example of *Sita's* representation above, it is evident that representational practices ride different vehicles and become closer to daily life. *Sita* in animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* is made closer to life since film is one of the media easily found in everyday domain, widely accepted, and vastly moved globally (Wedhowerti, 2016). Therefore, film mediates the meaning of how *Sita* is represented. Film as a medium also conveys the meaning of *Sita* as a more realistic model to emulate since she is brave to speak up her mind and not easily subjected.

Sita's actions, values, and belief guide the audience of the film on how to behave. As a more realistic role model, *Sita* teaches everybody to speak up in hard times. Being the central female character of the Ramayana, *Sita's* actions and values are widely spread and soon audiences relate those to their real experiences collectively. The famous epic of Ramayana depicts *Sita* as the wife of *Rama*. *Rama* rejects, banishes, and treats her badly. This reality is something audiences are aware of. Audiences are presented with Lévi-Strauss' oppositional structure of "good vs. evil". In the animated film *Sita Sings the Blues*, *Sita* serves as a heroine managing to survive through her immense resistance utilizing blues songs as her spaces to speak up.

The Indian epic of Ramayana has been reproduced in a lot different manners and media that its actions and values particularly those of *Sita's* are understood, observed, and widespread globally around the world. It means that Ramayana serves as a steward of answering prevalent question as well as offering reflection on human experience, hope,

desire, and anxiety. Accordingly, *Sita* functions as a mythological heroine possessing universally accepted pattern as having psychological, intellectual, and physical skill.

As every culture has collection of myths, Japan also has its own involving folk beliefs of the supernatural which are then reproduced in films. Many animated films produced by Japanese film industry are based on ancient myths and legends without any interference from Western sources (Okuyama, 2015). Clear examples of this phenomenon are those produced by Studio Ghibli. *Pom Poko*, for instance, it gains success as it is highly acclaimed. It was released in 1994 and award-winning including the *Animation of the Year Award* in Japan. Bringing forward Studio Ghibli excellent animating style, this movie vividly catches the emotional feeling of love, solidarity, and loyalty of the *tanuki* (raccoon dogs).

Directed by Isao Takahata, *Pom Poko* embraces great Japanese cultural significance basing its story on Japanese folklore and mythological animal of the *tanuki*. The thought-provoking environmental theme in the 1960s is raised by this movie. Its resonance of intersection between the Tama Hills modern housing development by human and the *tanuki*'s need to conserve the forest is felt worldwide. Tama Hills is the real housing estate in Southwest of Tokyo. The film focuses its attention on the life of the *tanuki* living in the area of Tama Hills. The *tanuki* are the native animal to Japan. In Japanese folklore, however, they have ability to impersonate human and shape-lifting (Huertas, 2021; Ortabasi, 2013). The *tanuki* show enormous struggle to nurture environment, jungle, food sources, and living territory.

Takahata depicts satiric discourse in the film when the *tanuki* watch tv programmes in order to research human activities. As a result, they become addicted and lose their motivation to fight. This is basically the essence of human when they love doing anything indoors and getting away from the natural world (Huertas, 2021). Unfortunately, this is against the concept of ecological Marxist tradition stating that human and nature have dependent relationship in order to survive and that human is part of nature (Longo & York, 2020). As the deforestation and urban development in the environment around Tama Hills grow faster, the *tanuki* then continue making various plans to fight against the construction workers. The acts of saving the environment and human's reality of destroying the nature in *Pom Poko* are interesting to study in semiotic realm as semiotics is concerned with the media (film) and representation. Therefore, this research is intended to study the representation of the *tanuki* in their effort of saving their natural home.

2. Literature Review

The representation of characters in Studio Ghibli animated films has invited scholars to analyze it based on semiotics. As a world-renowned film maker, Studio Ghibli has offered its audiences around the world with aesthetical, moral, environmental, economical, political, and psychological realities. Past studies yield findings on the characters' representation of Studio Ghibli films (Heise, 2014; Laksonia & Wijaksono, 2022; Pamungkas, Juniarta, and Rosyidi, 2018).

Heise (2014) focuses on environmental crisis or damage shown in animated films. The researcher concludes that animated films portray vividly the natural world of animals, plants, and features of landscape shaped by perceptions, agencies, and intentions where some still resemble those of humans, and some of which remain resolutely strange (Heise,

2014). The difference between Heise's and this research lies on the object of the study. Heise researches animated films produced by Disney, Studio Ghibli and other film producers providing broader perspectives on the portrayal of environmental damage across cultures; while this research only focuses its attention on *Pom Poko* in relation to Japanese environmental crisis in the 1960s.

Laksonia & Wijaksono (2022) focus on the struggles of *Princess Mononoke* to save the forest from capital-minded exploitation. The research yields that anthropocentric ideology becomes the main cause of environmental damage. Even though both studies employ semiotic approach, Laksonia & Wijaksono's employs Fiske's, while this study employs Barthes'. Other differences lie in the object of the study and also the reality where in Laksonia & Wijaksono's, human are at war with their fellow human, while in this research, the raccoon dogs are in their position to fight against human.

Another war becomes the focus of Pamungkas, et al.'s research (2018). Pamungkas, et al. applies Peircean model of semiotics to generate the meaning of characters' representation. The challenge of war grand-narration by *Grave of the Fireflies* is proven by having binary opposition. Both Pamungkas, et al.'s and this research present binary opposition. This study, however, brings forward the significant impact of environmental damage on the animals where to some sense, they have to surrender to human.

In relation to generating the meaning of characters' representation as mentioned before, semiotics offers its scientific method. As the first scholar to emphasize the importance of finding out the meaning in the messages conveyed in film, Barthes proposes semiotic model to address this. He highlights the magnitude of connotation in his theory. This is different from his predecessor, de Saussure, who stresses the importance of denotation. In Barthesian model, denotation is the first order or the literal meaning (1). Then, connotation comes at the second order (2). An image, for instance, its first order or denotative meaning is resulted from what the viewers or beholders recognize it (Chandler, 2022). In other words, it is related to the common sense or the obvious meaning. While to come to the second order, the viewers or beholders have to associate their personal knowledge and socio-cultural realities (association).

3. Research Method

This research employs Barthesian semiotic model to find out the representation of the *tanuki's* moves and to generate the meaning of their representation. The research is in the domain of media semiotics. In semiotics, the process of recording messages in physical way is called representation (Danesi, 2019). In understanding the representation and the meaning of the representation, the research is designed within four steps (data collection, data selection, data analysis, and data interpretation). This research is then qualitative in nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The data in this research are in the forms of images taken from certain scenes in *Pom Poko* where its total play duration is 119 minutes. The excerpt of each scene is taken where the *tanuki* make their efforts in saving their natural home. Totally, there are six images to analyze. To summarize, the researcher outlines semiotic research framework as follows.

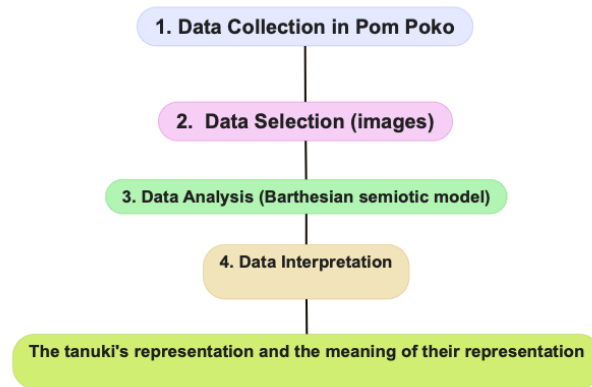


Figure 1. Semiotic Research Framework of *Pom Poko*

4. Results and Discussion

There are six images resulted from data collection process. Each datum presentation shows the time or the duration of the respective scene. Then, it is followed by its denotation and connotation. After all data are presented, thorough discussion is conducted. The results are presented as follows.

4.1 Datum 1



Figure 2. Scene 6.50 - 8.00

Denotation	A general meeting is led by <i>Osho</i> . Then, the elders formulate the course of action (five-year program realized in steps of action).
Connotation	This is the beginning of effort to save the forest home.

4.2 Datum 2



Figure 3. Scene 9.17 - 10.25

Denotation	The training is led by <i>Oruku</i> covering physical training and techniques to perfect the transforming ability.
Connotation	The <i>tanuki</i> perfect their ancient ability (art form).

4.3 Datum 3



Figure 4. Scene 12.50 - 13.45

Denotation	During a training session with <i>Osho</i> , a young <i>tanuki</i> named <i>Shokichi</i> mentions that the <i>tanuki</i> are too eager to please human (too good-natured).
Connotation	The awareness of defending and saving the forest home has arrived even at the young <i>tanuki</i> generation

4.4 Datum 4



Figure 5. 20.30 - 21.50

Denotation	Ten young <i>tanuki</i> are sent to a mission to give construction workers surprise attack that eventually kills three workers.
Connotation	The young <i>tanuki</i> continue defending and saving their forest home even at a more massive scale.

4.5 Datum 5



Figure 6. Scene 1.05.40 - 1.16.10

Denotation	The long awaited three transformation masters (<i>Gyobu</i> , <i>Hage</i> , and <i>Kincho</i>) finally arrive and conduct massive training for the <i>tanuki</i> to be in “Operation Spectre”.
Connotation	This depicts a brand new hope. The <i>tanuki</i> around Tama Hills hold a deep belief that the “transformation masters” can help them save their forest home through their transformation skill and massive training.

4.6 Datum 6



Figure 7. 1.38.36 - 1.41.40

Denotation	Reporters from a news station come to the forest upon receiving a letter from <i>Tsurugame</i> . Then, <i>Tsurugame</i> and <i>Okuru</i> appear and make a plea stating that the forest is their home
Connotation	This is the <i>tanuki</i> 's final resort of defending their forest home by vividly appearing on-camera.

All six images above depict the *tanuki*'s effort of defending their food sources, forest home, and natural environment in order to protect their next generation from starvation. Since the *tanuki* are assigned human qualities, they turn out becoming heroes for saving their environment and human are positioned as villains destroying the trees, natural habitat, and the *tanuki*'s food sources for the sake of urban development especially the need for settlement or estates. This is in line with the concept of Lévi-Strauss oppositional structure in contesting “good vs. evil” in myth (Danesi, 2020).

The *tanuki*'s acts of saving their environment represent their ecoterroristic resistance or ecoterrorism (Hertelendy & Alexander, 2024; Izak, 2022). In its general definition, ecoterroristic resistance or ecoterrorism is the use of force, various forms of violence, and sabotage for the sake of protecting the environment. The actions or moves are directed to agents, companies, even governments. In *Pom Poko* with the setting of post-war Japan in the 1960s, the environmental activities made by the *tanuki* portray the reality that Japan at that time receives global criticisms for its deforestation (Knight, 2010). Geographically mountainous, Japan also faces difficulties in balancing between environmental conservation and the need for economic advancements including urban development and settlement.

Seeing from the time setting of *Pom Poko* in the 1960s, it is evident that between 1945 to 1970, Japan was in the state of its economic growth and uncontrolled pollution (Karan, 2010). As a big player in economy in the golden 1960s, Japan was characterized by its huge industrial advancement and urban development. At that time, pollution, deforestation,

and environmental crisis were neglected in the name of development, modernization, and industrialization. The cruel reality in *Pom Poko* depicted vividly the actual Japan in the 1960s. This is in accordance with the premise forwarded by Heise (2014) that animation is used as a medium to deliver the natural vigorousness in protest against the destruction of nature. Accordingly, the *tanuki* in *Pom Poko* truly represent their ecoterroristic resistance until they have no more power at the very end of their battle against the greedy human.

5. Conclusion

All in all, based on the findings on the efforts and struggles of the *tanuki* in defending their forest home, it can be concluded that the *tanuki*'s moves represent their ecoterroristic resistance or ecoterrorism. The sabotage, surprise attack on construction workers, formulation of the course of action in five-year program, physical training, invitation of the three transformation masters, and public appearance on-camera represent the *tanuki*'s ecological terroristic ideology. The *tanuki* until the very last resort are always in favor of their natural world becoming the heroes of nature conservation. Humans continue to become the villains by destroying the forest for the sake of settlement and urban development in the Tama Hills. The truth about the *tanuki*'s ecoterroristic resistance is mediated through *Pom Poko* film.

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