

Visual Appeal and Environmental Messages in Studio Ghibli Anime: A Semiotic Analysis of Ecological Narratives in Japanese Animated Cinema

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000493>

Received: 06 September 2025; Accepted: 11 September 2025; Published: 15 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Studio Ghibli combines visual aesthetics with environmental messages in selected animated films. Using semiotic and visual analysis, it explores how composition, colour, movement, and symbolism shape ecological narratives. The analysis focuses on three major works—Princess Mononoke, Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, and My Neighbour Totoro, each portraying different aspects of the human–nature–technology relationship. Findings show that Studio Ghibli not only conveys sustainability messages effectively but also uses the cinematic language of animation to foster ecological awareness. The study highlights the significance of animation as a medium for environmental education and advocacy, offering insights into how visual storytelling can promote empathy for nature and inspire sustainable thinking.

Keywords: Studio Ghibli, Japanese animation, ecological narrative, visual semiotics, environmental sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Studio Ghibli, founded in 1985 by Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, is widely recognized as one of the most influential animation studios in global cinema. Known for its refined visual style and narratives rich in humanistic values, Studio Ghibli consistently emphasizes themes of ecology, spirituality of nature, and the balance between humans and the environment (Napier, 2001; Cavallaro, 2006). Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984), which laid the foundation for the studio's establishment, already demonstrated an early commitment to environmental concerns, long before sustainability became a mainstream cultural discourse.

In an era of climate crisis and biodiversity loss, media plays a crucial role in shaping ecological awareness and influencing public attitudes (Garrard, 2012). Studio Ghibli represents a unique form of animated cinema that entertains while also serving as a medium for pro-environmental communication. Its works frequently deploy lush landscapes, personification of natural elements, and depictions of conflict between technological progress and ecological harmony (Denison, 2015).

Films such as Princess Mononoke (1997) and My Neighbour Totoro (1988) not only celebrate the beauty of nature but also raise ethical questions about resource exploitation, human dominance over nature, and the importance of balance. This approach reflects Japanese cultural traditions such as satoyama and Shinto animism, which emphasize interconnectedness among all living beings (Takeuchi, 2010; Boyd & Nishimura, 2004).

This study investigates how Studio Ghibli employs visual strategies to convey ecological narratives. Using visual semiotics, the research analyzes how composition, colour, movement, and symbolism reinforce environmental

messages. Three films Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind, Princess Mononoke, and My Neighbour Totoro are examined for their ecological perspectives and socio-cultural contexts.

The aim is to provide a deeper understanding of how animation fosters environmental awareness through subtle but effective visual approaches, and how Ghibli's works contribute to broader discourses on sustainability in visual media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecocriticism Theory in Visual Media

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that explores the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment. Emerging in the early 1990s as a response to the global ecological crisis, it offers alternative ways of reading cultural texts with environmental concerns in mind (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). Garrard (2012) explains that ecocriticism not only examines representations of nature in texts but also analyzes how these texts construct or challenge human–nature relationships, whether reinforcing anthropocentric views or promoting an ecocentric worldview.

The scope of ecocriticism has since expanded beyond literature to include visual forms such as film, documentaries, visual arts, and animation. Visual media is particularly influential in shaping public imagination of the environment by using imagery, color, and movement to deliver messages emotionally and aesthetically (Brereton, 2015). Film, for instance, can shape perceptions of nature through cinematic devices such as mise-en-scène, natural landscapes, and symbolic allegory.

In Japanese anime, ecological discourse is reinforced by cultural values rooted in Shinto and Buddhist philosophies. Many works, especially those of Hayao Miyazaki, portray nature as a living entity with will and harmony (Napier, 2005). This reflects the animistic view in Japanese culture, where trees, rivers, mountains, and animals are regarded as spirits (kami) that deserve respect (Yoneyama, 2020; Miyazaki, 2021; Thomson, 2021). Thus, an ecocritical reading of anime requires attention to both visual techniques and cultural values.

The concept of ecocinema further highlights films that not only represent nature but also reshape how audiences perceive and relate to the natural world (Ivakhiv, 2013). Studio Ghibli animations can be regarded as ecocinema, as they challenge anthropocentric paradigms through narratives and visuals. For example, *Princess Mononoke* depicts human–nature conflict with moral complexity, portraying neither humans as purely destructive nor nature as passive.

Rust et al. (2013) argue that applying ecocriticism to visual media broadens our understanding of how popular culture fosters ecological awareness and behavioral change. In this sense, semiotic analysis of animated films is crucial for examining how elements like colour, composition, and symbolism convey environmental ideologies.

Overall, ecocriticism in visual media provides a strong framework for analysing how film and animation shape ecological awareness. Studio Ghibli exemplifies this by blending Japanese cultural values with distinctive visual storytelling, making its works central to discussions of visual ecocriticism.

Visual Aesthetics in Studio Ghibli Animation

Studio Ghibli is renowned for producing animation that is both narratively captivating and visually rich. Its visual aesthetics serve not merely as decoration but as a narrative medium that conveys symbolic meaning, cultural values, and environmental messages.

Cavallaro (2006) highlights Miyazaki's expressive use of colour, where lush greens symbolize harmony and purity of nature, while greys and browns signify destruction and pollution. Careful compositions such as framing distances between humans and landscapes or contrasts between technology and nature further reinforce ecological discourse.

Denison (2015) notes that Ghibli combines hand-drawn techniques with selective digital tools to create organic, lifelike worlds. This approach enhances authenticity and underscores nature's value as a living entity. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), detailed scenery and subtle animations of wind, water, and plants evoke emotional awareness of the environment. Similarly, Lamarre (2009) introduces the concept of animetism, where movement in animation becomes philosophical discourse. In Ghibli's works, natural motions—wind across fields, falling leaves, or interactions with animals will emphasize reciprocal human–nature relationships, presenting nature as both moral and emotional subject.



Figure 1: Scene from the animation *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984).



Figure 2: Scene from the animation *Princess Mononoke* (1997).

Ruh (2010) further argues that “the beauty of nature in Ghibli is never neutral; it is always ideologically and affectively charged.” Visual beauty thus functions as an ideological and affective tool for delivering pro-environmental messages.

Ghibli's aesthetics also draw on Japanese traditions such as *nihonga* and the design principle of *ma* (meaningful empty space), which provide reflective pauses and deepen viewers' ecological engagement (Napier, 2005;

Schodt, 2012). These techniques integrate silence and admiration of nature into the narrative, reinforcing ecological impact both emotionally and aesthetically.

Despite numerous studies on Ghibli's techniques, there is limited systematic semiotic analysis of how elements such as colour symbolism, space, and movement shape ecological narratives. Existing research often separates narrative and aesthetic aspects, without fully examining how visual aesthetics communicate ecological ideologies.

The literature review indicates that studies on environmental themes in anime mostly focus on narratives or moral messages, with less attention to visual semiotics. This study therefore fills that gap by combining ecocriticism and visual semiotics to analyze how Studio Ghibli employs composition, colour, symbolism, anthropomorphism, and natural movement to construct ecological narratives and foster environmental awareness.

Research Gap

Previous studies have examined either Ghibli's narrative or aesthetic elements separately. However, fewer have integrated both to analyze how visual semiotics communicates ecological ideologies. Most research also tends to focus on broad moral messages rather than the specific visual language through which they are expressed. This study addresses that gap by combining ecocriticism and semiotics to analyze how Studio Ghibli employs visual strategies like composition, colour symbolism, anthropomorphism, and movement to convey ecological values and encourage environmental awareness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the integration of two main theoretical frameworks: Ecocriticism Theory and Visual Semiotic Theory, which are employed to analyze the representation of the environment in Studio Ghibli's animations. This combination allows for a deeper understanding of how visual elements are used to convey complex ecological messages.

Ecocriticism Theory

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between humans and nature as represented in cultural texts, including literature, film, and visual media (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996). Garrard (2012) defines ecocriticism as the analysis of how nature is depicted and how these representations shape societal ecological awareness.

In the context of animation, ecocriticism helps investigate:

1. How visual narratives shape perceptions of nature.
2. The conflict between technological development and environmental sustainability.
3. The ecological values and ethics implicit in visual narratives.

Napier (2005) emphasizes that Japanese anime often reflects cultural values that prioritize harmony with nature, aligning with Shinto traditions and animism. Studio Ghibli consistently portrays the human-nature relationship as a core narrative element, making it a relevant subject for ecocritical analysis.

Furthermore, the ecosophy perspective of Arne Naess (1989) also serves as an important foundation. Naess distinguishes between shallow ecology, which is anthropocentric, and deep ecology, which positions nature as an entity with intrinsic value. Studio Ghibli's approach often aligns with the concept of deep ecology by emphasizing nature's right to exist free from human exploitation.

Visual Semiotic Theory

To decode the messages conveyed through images, this study applies Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, which categorizes signs into:

1. Icon: A sign that resembles its referent object, such as an image of a tree or animal that mimics its original form.
2. Index: A sign that has a causal or correlational relationship, such as smoke indicating pollution.
3. Symbol: A sign that depends on cultural conventions, such as the color green symbolizing sustainability or white representing purity.

Eco (1976) and Chandler (2007) assert that in film, visual signs do not exist in isolation but interact to form broader meanings through composition, color, movement, and lighting. Therefore, visual semiotics is used in this study to identify how these elements function in constructing ecological narratives.

Integration of Ecocriticism and Visual Semiotics

Integrating ecocriticism with visual semiotics enables a more comprehensive analysis. Ecocriticism provides the framework for values and ideologies, while visual semiotics offers the tools to analyze how these values are translated visually. This approach aligns with Ivakhiv (2013), who emphasizes that environmental cinema must be analyzed not only in terms of narrative but also through the visual structures and emotions constructed by imagery. Through this integration, the study can:

1. Understand ecological messages not only from the perspective of the story but also from visual symbolism.
2. Explain the relationship between aesthetics and environmental advocacy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on semiotic analysis as the primary method to understand how environmental messages are communicated through visual aesthetics in Studio Ghibli's animated films. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to examine hidden meanings and sign structures within visual texts, particularly in the context of complex visual communication like animation.

Research Design

The research design is a qualitative case study focusing on three main Studio Ghibli films:

1. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984)*
2. *My Neighbour Totoro (1988)*
3. *Princess Mononoke (1997)*

These three films were selected purposively based on their strength in conveying environmental themes, as well as their reputation in Japanese animation discourse as significant ecological narratives (Napier, 2005; Denison, 2015). These films not only feature expansive natural landscapes but also contain pro-environmental messages integrated into their narratives and visual aesthetics.

Data Collection Method

Data was collected through visual analysis of key scenes that are directly or symbolically related to environment messages. A frame-by-frame analysis technique was used to dissect each significant frame in conveying meaning, particularly in terms of visual structuring. This method pays attention to aspects such as:

1. **Composition and framing:** How space is divided and how objects and characters are positioned within the frame to convey specific messages (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013).

2. Use of colour and light: The symbolism of colour and lighting used to evoke emotions and signify narrative changes.
3. Visual symbolism: Images that carry symbolic meaning, such as forests, animals, mist, or ancient artifacts that convey ecological values.
4. Anthropomorphism of nature characters: How elements of nature (such as animals, forest spirits, and trees) are given human traits to enhance empathy and connection with nature (Cavallaro, 2006).
5. Contrast between technology and nature: The visual clash between human progress (weapons, machines, cities) and pristine natural landscapes, highlighting the conflict between modernization and sustainability.

Theoretical Framework: Peircean Semiotics

The visual analysis in this study is based on the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, which categorizes signs into three main types: icons, indices, and symbols (Peirce, 1955). This approach allows for the interpretation of multiple layers of meaning based on the relationship between the sign and its referent within the narrative context.

1. Icons refer to signs that resemble their objects, such as visual depictions of dense forests to indicate the fertility of nature.
2. Indices indicate a cause-and-effect relationship or direct indication, such as dark clouds or landscape destruction signaling pollution or conflict.
3. Symbols rely on cultural conventions, such as the use of mythical creatures (Totoro or forest spirits) as representations of guardians of the natural world.

Interpretation of these visual signs is conducted within the context of Japanese narrative and culture, taking into account elements of Shinto beliefs and animistic worldviews that often form the backdrop of Ghibli's works (Lamarre, 2009; Napier, 2005).

Data Analysis Technique

The study applies Peirce's semiotic categories—icon, index, and symbol (Peirce, 1955)—to interpret visual signs. For example:

1. Icon: a dense forest representing fertility.
2. Index: dark clouds indicating pollution.
3. Symbol: Totoro as a cultural symbol of harmony with nature.

Analysis was conducted iteratively, linking scene observations with ecocriticism theory and Japanese cultural contexts such as Shinto animism (Boyd & Nishimura, 2004). The triangulation of semiotics and ecocriticism ensured interpretations were consistent with both visual data and established ecological discourse.

This integrated approach not only clarifies how Studio Ghibli constructs ecological meaning but also provides a model for analyzing other visual media with sustainability themes.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Visual Composition and the Human-Nature Relationship

Studio Ghibli's films demonstrate how visual composition operates as a central medium for articulating

ecological discourse. In works such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), and *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), cinematic elements are mobilized not only to construct aesthetically compelling imagery but also to advance narratives on the human–nature relationship in ways that resonate with ecocritical principles.

One of the most significant strategies lies in the manipulation of scale and spatial organization within the frame. Human figures are frequently positioned as diminutive against expansive landscapes, visually subordinating humanity to the natural world. In *Princess Mononoke*, for instance, dense and mist-laden forests dominate the screen, while characters such as Ashitaka and San are rendered as marginal figures within the environment. This compositional choice underscores the ecocritical rejection of anthropocentrism, presenting nature as an entity of greater magnitude and agency (Garrard, 2012; Mortimer, 2014). The use of deep focus is particularly instructive: in Ashitaka's first entry into the forest, multiple layers of space—foreground pathways, mid-ground vegetation, and background silhouettes of ancient trees populated by spirit creatures—are simultaneously visible. As Bordwell and Thompson (2013) contend, depth in *mise-en-scène* not only enhances realism but also structures thematic meaning, here symbolizing the protagonist's passage from the human to the spiritual–natural realm.

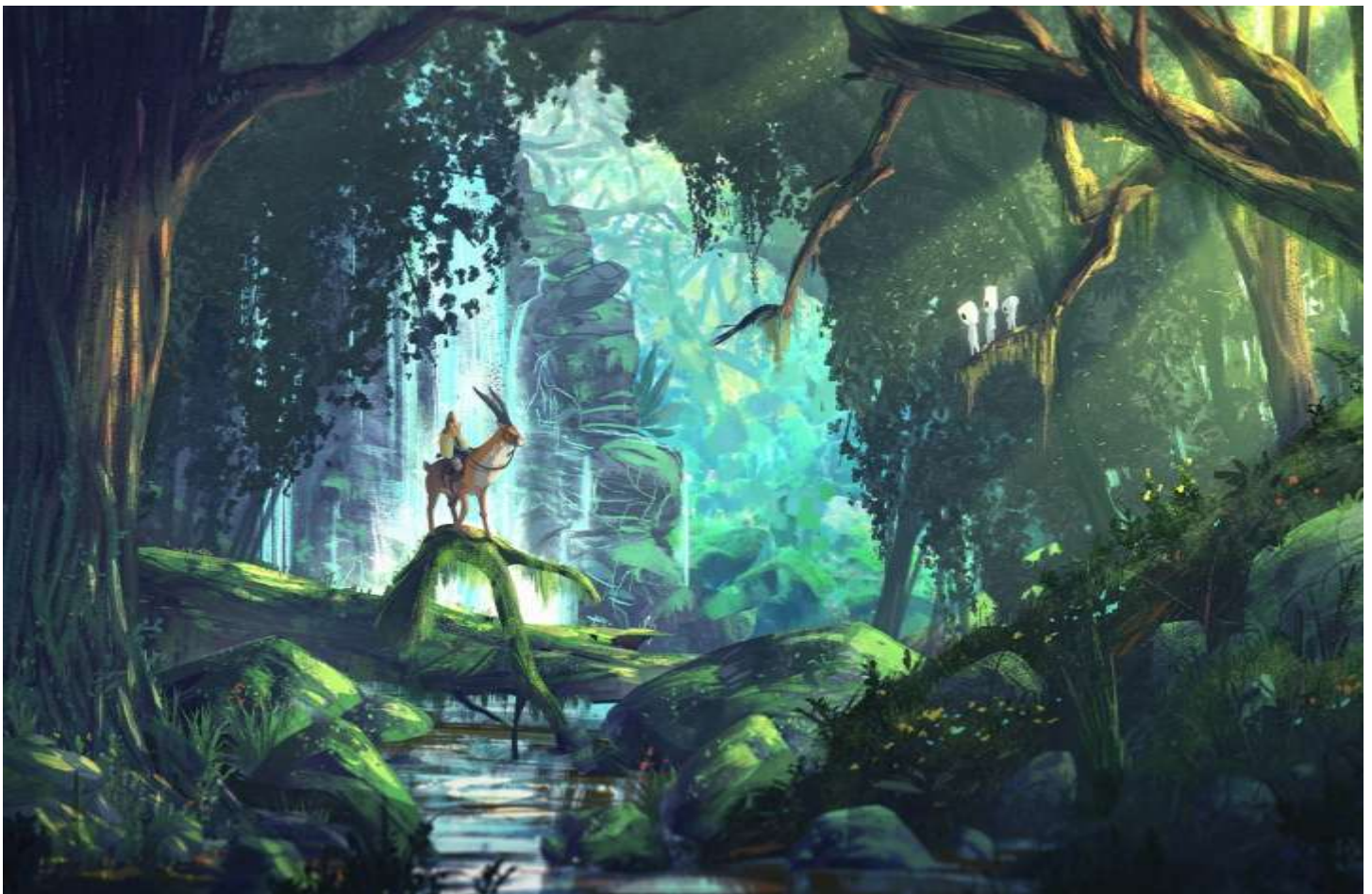


Figure 3: Scene from the animation *Princess Mononoke* (1997), set within a dense forest that structures the visual relationship between humans and nature.

Compositional balance is also achieved through symmetry and horizon lines, which frequently function as visual metaphors of ecological harmony. In *My Neighbour Totoro*, scenes of rice paddies and village forests employ horizontal framing to evoke stability and tranquility, situating children within a balanced environment that reflects the Japanese ecological concept of *satoyama*—a liminal zone between village and forest embodying mutual interdependence (Takeuchi, 2010). Similarly, in *Nausicaä*, the titular heroine is often depicted in postures of humility before colossal beings such as the Ohmu. Cavallaro (2006) interprets this as emblematic of Miyazaki's aesthetic orientation, which resists narratives of human mastery and instead emphasizes the interconnected vitality of all life forms.



Figure 4: Scene from the animation *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) that uses a horizontal composition with an expansive horizon to create an atmosphere of tranquility.

Equally crucial is Ghibli's use of compositional contrast to signify the antagonism between industrial modernity and ecological values. *Princess Mononoke* exemplifies this through the sharp juxtaposition of Irontown's angular, smoke-filled industrial architecture with the curvilinear, organic forms of the surrounding forest. This visual tension dramatizes the clash between technological progress and environmental sustainability (Napier, 2005; Lamarre, 2009), situating the landscape as a contested site of ideological struggle.



Figure 5: Scene from the animation *Princess Mononoke* (1997) depicting the conflict between the technological world and nature.

From a semiotic perspective, these compositional strategies function as systems of signification. Frames operate simultaneously through icons (naturalistic resemblance), indices (traces of human or ecological presence), and symbols (culturally embedded codes), thereby embedding ecological meaning within the visual language itself (Peirce, 1955). In this sense, Ghibli's compositions transcend decorative function to become a discursive apparatus, mediating complex ideas of sustainability, interdependence, and the moral dimensions of human–nature relations.

Colour Symbolism in Ecological Narratives

Colour in Studio Ghibli animations is not merely decorative but serves as a semiotic medium central to ecological storytelling. Hayao Miyazaki employs color as a subtle yet powerful tool, enabling audiences to internalize environmental meanings through symbolic visual experiences (Cavallaro, 2006; Napier, 2005).

In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), contrasting palettes illustrate the clash between nature and human destruction. Natural environments appear in organic hues—greens, blues, golds, and earthy tones—signifying ecological balance and purity. In contrast, polluted or war-torn landscapes are marked by blood red, iron grey, and dense black, symbolizing death, decay, and contamination (Denison, 2015; Lamarre, 2009). Green, especially, functions as a universal emblem of life, hope, and renewal across Ghibli films. In *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), layers of green reflect biodiversity and harmony, with forests and fields depicted in warm, protective tones tied to Totoro as a guardian of nature [6].

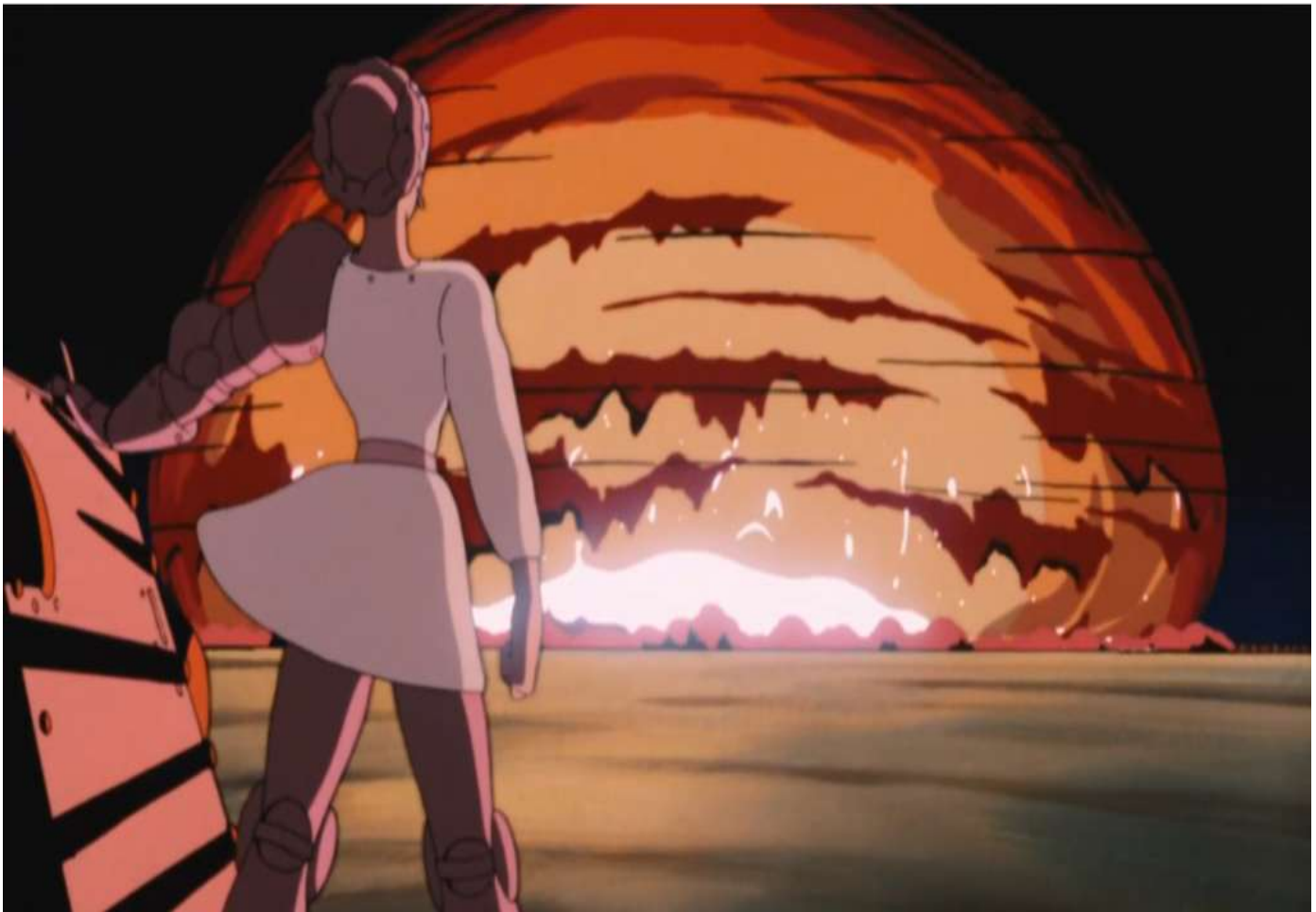


Figure 6: Scene from the animation *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) depicting the use of dark colours and tones resulting from environmental destruction.

Neutral and desaturated tones—pale gray and white—often signal instability. In *Totoro*, moments of sadness, such as the mother's illness, are framed with muted backgrounds, evoking loss of balance in both the natural and familial worlds. This demonstrates how color mirrors characters' psychological states, often intertwined with environmental conditions (Wells, 1998).

In *Princess Mononoke* 1997, gray tones dominate Irontown, embodying industrial exploitation, in sharp contrast to the vibrant forests that symbolize vitality and resistance. Color also functions as an ecological sign system. The Ohmu in *Nausicaä* glow blue when calm but shift to red when threatened, visually indexing their state as symbols of nature—peaceful when respected, destructive when provoked. This reflects Peircean semiotics, where color acts as an index of narrative conditions (Peirce, 1955; Eco, 1976).



Figure 7: Scene from the animation *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), where the Ohmu emits a blue glow while in a peaceful state.

Overall, Ghibli's use of color is deliberate and symbolic, embedding ecological, spiritual, and moral values. Far from mere entertainment, these films operate as visual pedagogy, cultivating ecological awareness among diverse audiences (Ivakhiv, 2013).

Anthropomorphism as a Narrative Strategy

Anthropomorphism is a central narrative strategy in Studio Ghibli films, where animals, spirits, and natural elements are endowed with consciousness and emotion. This technique strengthens the emotional bond between viewers and the natural world, fostering ecological awareness and empathy (Napier, 2005; Allison, 2006).

In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), figures such as the Shishigami and Moro embody wisdom and agency, acting as guardians while also retaliating against exploitation. Their portrayal emphasizes nature as an active force rather than a passive backdrop (Mortimer, 2014). Similarly, Totoro in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) personifies a benevolent nature spirit whose expressions and gestures communicate without words. His interactions with Satsuki and Mei illustrate the possibility of respectful, non-verbal human–nature relationships (Cavallaro, 2006).

This anthropomorphic framing aligns with Japanese spiritual traditions, particularly Shinto beliefs that all natural phenomena—trees, rivers, mountains, and animals—harbour a spirit or *kami*. Thus, anthropomorphism operates not only as a narrative device but also as an articulation of Japanese ecological philosophy, offering international audiences a worldview grounded in interdependence rather than domination (Thomas, 2015; Boyd & Nishimura, 2004).

In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), the Ohmu exhibit human-like emotional traits, responding to pain and showing affection. An injured Ohmu becomes a symbol of nature's suffering, while Nausicaä's empathy demonstrates how compassion toward non-human beings can lead to ecological restoration (Denison, 2015; Lamarre, 2009). Wells (1998) argues that anthropomorphism in animation enables audiences to transcend realism and absorb moral lessons through allegory and symbol. In Ghibli's case, it functions as a medium for

ecological pedagogy, particularly effective with younger audiences attuned to fantasy and emotion.

From an ecocritical perspective, anthropomorphism challenges anthropocentric hierarchies by granting nature its own “voice.” This narrative strategy reframes nature as a moral subject with independent rights and agency (Garrard, 2012; Ivakhiv, 2013).

Overall, anthropomorphism in Ghibli films operates beyond aesthetic imagination. It is a deliberate strategy that fosters empathy, provokes moral reflection, and underscores humanity’s interdependent relationship with the natural world.

Contrast Between Technology and Nature in Visual Discourse

One of Studio Ghibli’s most distinctive features is its portrayal of the tension between technological progress and natural harmony. This theme is conveyed not only through plot but also through visual design, color palettes, and cinematography. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), the stark contrast between Irontown and the ancient forest illustrates this conflict. Irontown is rendered in shades of gray, rusty red, and black smoke, symbolizing industrial destruction and alienation (Napier, 2005; Boyd and Nishimura, 2004), whereas the forest of the Shishigami is depicted with deep greens, soft blues, and golden hues, enriched by sunlight and mist to emphasize spirituality and ecological balance (Lamarre, 2009; Allison, 2006).

Importantly, technology is not portrayed as inherently “evil.” Lady Eboshi, the leader of Irontown, empowers marginalized groups such as lepers and former prostitutes, yet her exploitation of nature reveals moral imbalance. Thus, the visual design of Irontown conveys both physical pollution and the ethical ambiguities of modern progress (Denison, 2015).

In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), the post-apocalyptic world reflects technology’s destructive legacy through airships, robots, and weapons. However, Nausicaä herself uses tools and her white glider not to dominate but to understand ecosystems and build relationships with the Ohmu. The cinematography often shows her glider harmoniously integrated into natural landscapes, presenting technology as potentially complementary rather than destructive (Penn, 2025). This aligns with Naess’s principle of deep ecology, which advocates for technologies that respect ecological interconnectedness (Naes, 1989; Garrard, 2012).

Laputa: Castle in the Sky (1986) extends this theme through the floating city of Laputa, once a symbol of technological grandeur but ultimately reclaimed by nature. Vines overrun machinery, birds nest in ruins, and the environment reasserts its dominance, underscoring the ecocritical view that technology must coexist with rather than resist nature (Ivakhiv, 2013).

Through set design, cinematography, and symbolism, Studio Ghibli critiques narratives equating progress with exploitation. Instead, it advocates a vision of balance and responsibility, where technology becomes sustainable only when embedded within ecological harmony.

Movement and Dynamism in Natural Scenes

A distinctive strength of Studio Ghibli lies in its animation of nature as a dynamic and expressive presence. Elements such as wind, water, light, and foliage are imbued with movement, transforming landscapes from static backdrops into active narrative agents. These motions embody animistic spirituality and the aesthetic of *mono no aware*—an awareness of life’s transience and beauty (Napier, 2005; Lamarre, 2009).

In *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), the iconic scene of Mei, Satsuki, and Totoro planting seeds exemplifies this approach. The trees not only grow but sway and breathe with undulating rhythms, reflecting fertility and the Shinto concept of *kami*, spirits inhabiting the natural world (Boyd and Nishimura, 2004). Similarly, Ghibli’s depiction of wind serves as a key narrative metaphor. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), the flowing motion of air conveys freedom and continuity. Nausicaä’s glider flight, with hair and clothing drifting in harmony, symbolizes the balance between human and nature rather than human dominance (Mumcu and Yilmaz, 2018).



Figure 8: Scene from the animation *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) depicting the planting of seeds and their growth into towering trees.

Water also serves as a symbolic element that conveys transformation and reflection. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), the slow ripples of the forest pond where the Shishigami resides embody tranquility and healing. Here, water is rendered not only as a natural element but as a moral mirror, evoking transformation and forgiveness (Allison, 2006).

Through these subtle yet profound movements, Ghibli animates natural environments as living forces, reinforcing ecological and spiritual dimensions of its narratives.



Figure 9: Scene from the animation *Princess Mononoke* (1997) depicting the tranquil water pond often featured in the film.

Implications And Contemporary Relevance

In the context of accelerating climate change, ecosystem degradation, and biodiversity loss, visual narratives that combine aesthetics with ecological values are increasingly significant. Studio Ghibli demonstrates how popular media, particularly animation, can function as a powerful medium for environmental communication that transcends cultural boundaries.

Unlike fear-based activism or documentary realism, Ghibli employs a “soft pedagogy” that engages audiences emotionally through beauty, symbolism, and narrative (Alaimo, 2010; Goleman, Bennett, & Barlow, 2012). This approach builds empathy and emotional connection to the natural world, which is central to environmental education.

Ghibli’s works also align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly:

1. SDG 13: Climate Action – fostering awareness of ecological crises.
2. SDG 15: Life on Land – highlighting biodiversity and forest protection.
3. SDG 4: Quality Education – supporting sustainability education through media.

By integrating cultural traditions such as animism and *satoyama* landscapes, Ghibli elevates local ecological wisdom into global discourse (Takeuchi, 2010). This model suggests that animators from other regions could adapt their own cultural values to address environmental issues, enriching global ecological communication with diverse perspectives.

In education, Ghibli films have proven useful for teaching sustainability concepts. Studies show that narrative media, including animation, enhance students’ environmental sensitivity and critical thinking (Safitri et al., 2021). This positions Ghibli’s films as valuable resources for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

Overall, Studio Ghibli offers a multidimensional model of ecological communication by uniting entertainment, artistry, and environmental awareness. In a fragmented media landscape, these films exemplify how cultural texts can nurture empathy, inspire reflection, and support collective action for a sustainable future.

CONCLUSION

Studio Ghibli, founded in 1985 by Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, is widely recognized as one of the most influential animation studios in global cinema. Known for its refined visual style and narratives rich in humanistic values, Studio Ghibli consistently emphasizes themes of ecology, spirituality of nature, and the balance between humans and the environment (Napier, 2001; Cavallaro, 2006). *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), which laid the foundation for the studio’s establishment, already demonstrated an early commitment to environmental concerns, long before sustainability became a mainstream cultural discourse.

In an era of climate crisis and biodiversity loss, media plays a crucial role in shaping ecological awareness and influencing public attitudes (Garrard, 2012). Studio Ghibli represents a unique form of animated cinema that entertains while also serving as a medium for pro-environmental communication. Its works frequently deploy lush landscapes, personification of natural elements, and depictions of conflict between technological progress and ecological harmony (Denison, 2015).

Films such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) not only celebrate the beauty of nature but also raise ethical questions about resource exploitation, human dominance over nature, and the importance of balance. This approach reflects Japanese cultural traditions such as *satoyama* and Shinto animism, which emphasize interconnectedness among all living beings (Takeuchi, 2010; Boyd & Nishimura, 2004).

This study investigates how Studio Ghibli employs visual strategies to convey ecological narratives. Using visual semiotics, the research analyzes how composition, color, movement, and symbolism reinforce environmental

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