

Representation of Radical Environmentalism in *Pom Poko* and *First Reformed*

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Abstract. In the age of social media and streaming platforms, the visuality of an idea has become much more important than before, including in the space of environmental activism. The representation of an eco-activism idea campaigning for climate change, including the more radical practice of those activists, is now communicated mainly not with written words but through the audio-visual medium of film or vlog to the audience. In the realm of cinema, films are worth analyzing regarding their representation of radical environmental activism *Pom Poko* (1994) directed by Isao Takahata, and *First Reformed* (2017) by Paul Schrader, because of their originality and nuanced representation of radical environmental activism. Through these films, we can see not only the surface representation of radical environmentalism but also the philosophy and reason behind it that usually has been overlooked. The authors chose both films to highlight that radical environmentalists' ideology and actions have been depicted relevantly since 1994 and continue in 2017 and beyond. Using hermeneutics reading of the text and Bordwell's four levels of meanings, we found that the cinema, specifically fictional films, can be an effective tool to represent the nuanced idea of environmentalism and radical environmentalism as much as its documentary counterpart.

1 Introduction

It can be said that the 21st century is the age of visual media. With the rise of social media and film streaming platforms, we see that visual representation has increasingly become the tool for communicating the idea of an individual or a group, whether it is through conventional film or new media video on social media. These changes also in parallel to another significant change in the environment, with the effect of climate change caused by human activities, are increasingly apparent in the realm of conventional cinema there is also an increasing number of several films, whether it is documentary or narrative films, that use the theme of environment as its central narrative. These films are not without their effects on the general public. For example, two documentaries, *Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Sexy Killers* (2019) manage to achieve a very public response by making the government and corporations to be put the light of public opinion court regarding their activities that contributed to worsening the climate change [1]. This phenomenon illustrated the effectiveness of conventional cinema in communicating an idea to the public by using dramaturgy to appeal not only to the audience's reason but also to emotion.

Nevertheless, another inconvenient truth that still lingers in the representation of climate change in cinema is the overlooking of narrative cinema in this conversation. Although many narrative films have had environmental issues as their central themes since the '90s, with the popularity of the narrative film, it became a wasted potential to put the issue of environmentalism

to the audience. Narrative films can also do more things that a documentary cannot do in the narrative and film style because of their fictitious nature, including dramatization to appeal to the audience's emotion to sympathize with the idea put forward in the picture. This is only a fraction of how narrative cinema can become an effective tool of communication for environmental issues and activism if it can be appropriately utilized.

This paper will look at two films that put environmental issues and activism, specifically radical environmentalism, as their central theme. Although different in genre and style, these films have the same underlying narrative of radical environmentalism and thus can provide a clear and diverse illustration of the potential of films as a communication tool for environmental activism. We will see how narrative films can add a nuanced and emotional view to these otherwise deeply polarizing issues by using dramatic tools such as script, cinematography, and directing to put forward a great film dramatically while also adhering to the environmental principle that it put forth. We will also look at how narrative films can provide nuance and a philosophical layer to these issues while not deviating from the innate nature of fictional works of art.

1.1 Objective

This paper aims to look at the potential of narrative films to become a communication tool for

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environmental activism ideas by using dramaturgical tools to appeal to the audience's reason and emotion.

2 Literature Review

Like any other radical ideas and group, radical environmentalism came out as a reaction to the failure of more moderate and mainstream environmentalist groups [2]. Although in the fundamentals, there is virtually no difference between radical environmentalists and the more mainstream moderate groups. The difference between the radical environmentalist groups and the mainstream groups is in how they practice their activism. In contrast, moderate and environmentalists mainly use the conventional method of activism, whether lobbying, campaigning, or demonstrating, to pressure legislators or the government to take action against climate change. Radical environmentalists saw this action as futile because the government interest was also in line with these corporations and took a different road by making environmentalist ideas into a radical revolutionary strain of environmentalism.

Radical environmentalists mainly practiced direct action like civil disobedience or symbolic action with a shock value to communicate their ideology [3]. For example, they were chaining themselves to a tree to protest against the loss of natural habitat or raising the flag on coal ships as a symbolic gesture against coal industries. Because of this shock value practice, the actions of radical environmentalist groups can be polarizing to the public, who may feel uncomfortable with their actions or feel that their actions are futile. However, whether the public agrees with their actions or not, the primary purpose of radical environmentalist groups is to seek the attention of the public and, in turn, create a conversation with the hope of holding the corporation that they took action accountable.

Some radical environmentalist groups took this action further by going from what was generally a harmless form of direct action like in the example above to a violent harmful one, whether through tree spiking, arson, or even bombing. The groups that practiced these violent acts are generally classified as eco-terrorist.

Eco-terrorism is a violent act committed by a group that espouses an environmentalist ideology. These acts are generally done to sabotage the activities at their target or to directly damage the economic means of the target by targeting their production facility; an act is also known as ecotage, an abbreviation of eco-sabotage. However, although these acts can be very violent, none of these groups that are classified as eco-terrorist have any direct intention to harm the workers at the site of the target, although some of them adopted biocentrism ideology which proposed that the superiority of the natural world (Biosphere) rather than human (Anthropocene) [4]. The *modus operandi* of groups classified as eco-terrorist is in the form of leaderless resistance. It is different from conventional resistance, where there is a hierarchal structure; many eco-terrorist classified groups opt for an anarchy structure without any heads or leaders giving orders. Instead, they

encourage free movement for its members to 'fight' the 'enemies.' [4].

Nevertheless, although the paragraph above may have convinced some people that there is such a group that commits eco-terrorism, as [5]. stated, the term eco-terrorism itself is problematic. Because these groups, although committing an act usually categorized as 'terrorism,' lack any other characteristics of what can be attributed to a terrorist group. For one, although advocating for the destruction of property, these groups are not advocating, even outright banning, killing, or hurting any human, a stark difference from another terrorist group where human lives can be the primary target. Furthermore, this term, although used heavily in the general discourse of these groups, is marred with controversial classification impacted by the controversial enactment of the Patriot Act [5]. Thus, although in this paper, the term eco-terrorism will be used, it is not to be understood as an endorsement of the term validity but instead as a generalization to make it easier to classify the activities that the character do in the films.

Ontological Security is a concept that draws from the works of English sociologist Anthony Giddens. Ontological security can be understood as the security of being where an individual relies on the stability of their relationship with others while also feeling that the life will continue as usual without any fear of existential threat to themselves. Moreover, when social actors' understanding is disrupted through conflict or natural disasters, their ontological security can crumble [6]. in the conversation about environmental issues today, the threat of environmental destruction and climate change is shifting from purely physical world issues to existential threats for humanity. With the increasing climate instability, this existential threat is growing more vivid and close to humans. In this paper, Ontological Security can be seen as the underlying motivation of radical environmentalism ideas and the subsequent act of eco-terrorism that the characters in these films do or trying to do. Because although this concept is born and mainly used in a social science discipline and rarely in arts, this concept can be helpful to explain not only the motivation of the character in the film but also the possible explanation of the radical environmentalist in the real world.

It can be understated how influential films have been in the realm of the public communication sphere since their inception; films are designed to appeal to their audience's emotion with techniques that is an amalgamation of the different art medium that came before them, making the film an apt tool to manipulate the audience emotionally [7]. This statement is even more accurate and easy with the rise of video streaming platforms that can stream films on demand and open access to the public to make and exhibit their works in a way that has never been done before. The age of the internet brings populist ideals to the cloistered film ecosystem.

The film is also an effective tool to communicate an idea. Unlike written words, it does not need prior knowledge or skills for an audience to understand a film. as long as the film is appropriately made, the audience

can understand and even be empathic to the character and the idea behind it. This phenomenon also explains that, since its early development, cinema has become a propaganda tool. From Eisenstein's *October: Ten Days That Shook The World* (1927), which is a propaganda film for the newly established Soviet Union, to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of The Will* (1935), which is a propaganda film for Adolf Hitler, both films showcase the massive march in Nuremberg. Movies are always an effective tool to make people who maybe cannot read or cannot understand technical language be sympathetic to the ideology presented in the film.

This manipulation of emotion came from the film form. Film form is the holistic part that creates a film. [8] divided film form into two parts narrative and style. The narrative is the continuity of the film story on screen. It is also divided into two parts the plot (meaning, the moment that is happening on screen that the audience can see) and the story (which is the implicit event that the audience can see but can understand happening). A plot is a killer with a knife going into a room of its victim, and after the shout ends, they get out; a story without showing the audience that the killer has claimed the victim's life. The second part of the film form is film style which is the technical aspects of the film (cinematography, sound, editing, and directing), which serve as how the narrative is presented to the audience [8]. these two parts, hand in hand, can manipulate the audience's emotion and communicate their idea to the audience through film. In this paper, we will see how film narrative and style can communicate the idea of radical environmentalism and environmental issues using the film form as the basis and how it can create a nuanced, deep yet clear, and engaging picture.

3 Methods

This paper will analyze *Pom Poko* and *First Reform* since both films explicitly depict the act of radical environmentalists. We chose films from different eras, 1994 and 2017, respectively. The idea is to underline that since *Pom Poko* was released in 1994 until *First Reform* in 2017, the ideology of radical environmentalism still exists and is relevant and essential to discuss the balance of nature to achieve a biospheric harmony situation.

Moreover, both films are worth to be discussed, considering their originality and nuanced representation of radical environmental activism. Through these films, we can see not only the surface representation of radical environmentalism but also the philosophy and reason behind it that usually has been overlooked.

The authors will analyze both films and other resources by using hermeneutical approach of reading the text to find it's thematic relevance to this research topic the purpose of hermeneutical approach according to Paul Ricœur is 'deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning' and 'unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning' [9] this is especially useful when analyzing a film because film even more so those who can be classified as arthouse tend to use a lot subtext in it whether through its mise-

en-scene, editing, or narrative, this hermeneutic approach to interpret this film can also enriched the interpretation especially when linked to the four levels of meaning approach as described by Bordwell and Thompson's "Film Art: an Introduction" which is referential meaning (the plot of the film), explicit meaning (the meaning of the plot of the film or lessons of the film), implicit meaning (the meaning that is not directly shown in film plot or visuals), and symptomatic meaning (the meaning of the film in a larger historical and cultural context outside of the film) [7].

4 Data Collection

The data is collected through two films, *Pom Poko* and *First Reformed*. The author also uses literature and film criticism columns relevant to the subject at hand and analyzes it with the hermeneutic method to uncover the hidden meaning and four levels of meaning to analyze the film's meaning by layers.

5 Result and Discussion

5.1 Pom Poko

5.1.1 Synopsis of The Film.

The film focuses on shapeshifting Raccoons that live on a mountain and suddenly face a significant threat to their livelihood, an urban real estate development on their mountain. Not wanting their beloved mountain to be destroyed by humans, the raccoon began to develop a plan to eliminate the workers from their mountain. Although these plans are initially benign, they grow increasingly bloody as the raccoon's despair increases when all of their previous plans fail. In the end, there is a divide between a group of raccoon that wants a more radical and extreme way to get rid of the workers and a group of raccoon that still think that the only way is to use a more benign and moderate means. In the end, the raccoon lost, and many now are forced to assimilate by shapeshifting into humans and working typical jobs, including one of our protagonists, before meeting his old friend who refuses to assimilate. In the end, he changes back into raccoon form and begins to sing and dance with other raccoons in the field on a golf course [10].

5.1.2 Analysis of The Film.

If we look through Bordwell's four levels of meaning, then *Pom Poko* meanings can be categorized to:

1. Referential Meaning: A raccoon village fighting to preserve their mountain home against a real estate developer
2. Explicit meaning: Humans must pay attention to nature when building something
3. Implicit meaning: Human economic and technology development often came at the cost of the natural ecosystem

4. Symptomatic meaning: This film is a critique of Japanese corporation greediness at the height of the financial bubble that put profit motive as the number one priority and committed environmental destruction to achieve it.

One of the ways this idea is communicated to this idea/critic is by a technique called plasticism. In his book about Disney animation, Eisenstein coined a phrase called plasmatic to denote the unique nature of animated films compared to their live-action counterpart. Plasmatic for Eisenstein is the ability of animated film to contour and unnaturally bend their body, something that the live-action film, of course, cannot do so quickly [11]. *Pom Poko* is an excellent example of this plasmatic nature because the director Isao Takahata adapted a Japanese folktale about the shapeshifting raccoon and made it into a movie about fighting for environmentalism. In *Pom Poko*, we will meet a village of shapeshifting raccoons who must fight to preserve their mountain home from real estate developers who want to build a new housing complex [12]. The raccoon in this film can change into three shapes: their classic cartoon shape when they live their life, as usual, a rough sketch shape when they are hurt, and a realistic drawing shape when they are in human society. These raccoons also can change into anything from humans to ghosts, which they used to fight the humans [13].

The two ways the raccoons change shape are not the same. The former is a stylistic choice of the director, and the latter is part of the plot. The plot of the raccoon's ability to shapeshift is interesting because this is their weapon to fight against humans. In the film, the raccoon, after failing to drive away, humans became increasingly radical. They used their shapeshifting ability to not only scare the workers but to commit acts of sabotage, from diverting the truck drivers to create accidents to fighting the police in riots using their testicles that can grow larger. However, this film, although it can be weird and fringe, provides us with a nuanced view of the reasons behind the raccoon's action. First, they are not radical and use their ability to kill or create accidents. They want to scare the workers, and the radicalization happens because of increasing despair that they will lose their home and be forced to be away from their beloved mountain. The human residential development broke their stable life and ontological security and turned them into an existential threat.

With a close reading of the text (hermeneutics), the stylistic changes of the raccoon can be argued as symbolic in two ways. First, to make the audience not forget that these raccoons exist in real life (minus the shapeshifting, of course), and also to symbolize the changing mountain. In this film, not only the raccoons can change shape, but also their mountain, their home where they were born and live. However, when their ability to shapeshift is natural, their home changing is not due to human nature that seeks to build a place to live while displacing the natural tenants of that habitat. This stylistic choice is even more emphasized when at the end of the movie, one of the raccoons says to the audience that what they were watching is not pure

fiction but this problem that many animals suffer as a consequence of human actions.

5.2 First Reformed

5.2.1 Synopsis of the film

The film focuses on 'Reverend Toller, a minister of a small congregation in a historic church in New York who struggles with his faith and alcoholism after his son died in the war. He began to write a diary for himself that contained his struggles with faith and relationship. On the outside, Rev. Toller seems like an ordinary minister, but it all changes when he meets with a young wife who wants Reverend Toller to counsel his depressed husband. When Rev. Toller met him, he began to talk about environmental destruction and how corporations knowingly destroy the ecosystem for profit gain. Rev. Toller, who is baffled, gives his ordinary spiritual advice to the husband and leave, but suddenly he is told that the husband committed suicide. Rev. Toller, affected by the news, began to search about the man's worries and found out about how corporations and human activity are actively destroying the Earth. There is only one problem, one of the corporation owners polluting the environment is the same man who sponsored his church anniversary and knew Rev. Toller found himself in a contradiction between his struggling faith and the church institution. After a tense conversation with the company owner, Rev. Toller grew more radical like the now-deceased husband. One night the young wife came to Rev. Toller to talk, and it grew to the wife, and Rev. Toller meditated together by holding their body closed on the top-bottom position. On the day of the anniversary, Rev. Toller, who now is radicalized, prepares himself by wearing a bomb vest underneath his priest robe and tying barbed wire around his body, ready to bomb the event that the company owner also attends. Until he saw the young wife participate in the event even though he told her not to. The now uncertain take out the bomb vest and untie the barbed wire, and plans to commit suicide until their young wife comes into the room and they kiss [14]

5.2.2 Analysis of the film.

"Will God Forgive Us?" is the dialog that the main character of Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed* said when he was confronted with the existential and theological problem of environmental destruction. The main character is Reverend Toller, the priest at a historical church that used to be part of the underground railway that helped enslaved people escape from the South [15]. While not the most stable, Reverend Toller's ontological security is not threatened either. That is until he meets a young wife that comes to him asking for help for her husband. She goes into despair because of what he sees as environmental destruction threatening his and his family's ontological security.

With the approach of Bordwell's four levels of meaning, this film's meanings can be categorized to:

1. Referential: A priest who faced with a contradiction between his faith and his job
2. Explicit: Environmental destruction is not only a physical world problem but also a faith one
3. Implicit: This film portrays the contradiction of a priest that is stuck between his job in a religious institution and his faith that the destruction of the environment is an act against God who created it
4. Referential: This film shows the hypocrisy of US Christians. They do not believe that climate change exists or is caused by human activities and the religious institution that preaches how God created Earth but also takes donations from corporations that are actively destroying it for profit.

As the author wrote above, the discussion about climate change and the environment has shifted in recent years from purely physical and biological matter to affecting the Anthropocene existence, and environment threat has become an existential threat. This discussion shift became the central premise of this film. If *Pom Poko* brings the environmental issue to animal life, this film brings the issue directly to our bodily existence and our existential and theological [16]. This film shows not only environmental issues as a pure ontological security problem but also a religious one.

The film communicates this not only by the plot and story where Reverend Toller in the end, but also became a radical environmentalist and planned on suicide bombing at his church celebration but more interestingly by stylistic choices that the director Paul Schrader made.

Since the film's primary purpose is to communicate that the idea of the environmental issues is as much theological and existential as physical, Paul Schrader decided to put a touch of surrealism in this movie as a symbol of the transcendental issue problem. There is a scene where Reverend Toller and the young wife, who now has lost her husband due to suicide, meditate by laying on top of each other. Schrader makes them levitate from the ground and be suspended in the air when they do this. With a close reading of the text, this is interpreted as an attempt made by Schrader to paint the transcendental mood in the film and make the subsequent issue of the environment a transcendental one. By levitating and having the environmental destruction footage green-screened in the background, Schrader symbolizes the transcendent state of both Rev. Toller and the young wife. The transcendental issues of the environment are not only external problems but also related to faith and theological problems. Hence, it reinforces the idea of environmentalism as an existentialist crisis of humankind instead of just the natural world.

6 Conclusion

Film as a communicative tool of the idea is under use by the environmental activism community. The film, since its inception, has been an art medium that appeals to its audience's emotions. Because of that, since its early development, the film has been used not only as entertainment but also as a form of government propaganda, whether it is by the Soviets or Nazis.

Although successful documentary films have attracted public attention to the environmental issues it shows in the narrative fiction film scene, environmental issues are still very much underrepresented compared to other social issues.

Narrative fiction film as a medium can use dramaturgical tools to communicate environmental issues much more nuanced and emotional than its documentary counterpart. The reason is partly that fiction film has much more freedom in the story and stylistic choices than documentary and is easier to appeal to a casual audience who might not be knowledgeable about the environmental issue.

The two examples of how film can represent nuanced and deep points of view can be found in two films, *Pom Poko* and *First Reformed*, both dealing with controversial issues in environmental activism, radical environmentalism, and eco-terrorism. Radical environmentalism is a reaction to the perceived failure of mainstream, more moderate activist groups. Radical environmental belief in direct action against the people they perceived as environmental destroyers compared to the mainstream who favors pressuring the country's legislators to take action. This direct action, although mostly nonviolent, can be taken further into more violent means, which is called eco-terrorism. But the term eco-terrorism itself, although used in many of the discussions about this act, is troubling in itself because it is marred by controversial legislation known as Patriot Act that was enacted under the Bush administration post 9/11

Pom Poko and *First Reformed* use narrative and style to communicate a more nuanced and philosophical picture of these controversial issues by asking 'why' not 'how' and 'what'. In the case of *Pom Poko*, the reasoning behind the act of eco-terrorism that the raccoons do is because of the despair of losing their beloved mountain home to a human who wants to build a housing project [17]. In the case of *First Reformed*, it is the priest who stuck between his duty to his church and his theological and existential conflict against environmental destruction [18]. Both films have the same underlying narrative: they do what they do not because of some twisted ideology because there is a threat against their ontological security that makes their life from stable into despair in the face of existential threat. The nuanced portrayal of this film brings the discussion of climate change and environmental issues from the purely physical and biological into the realm of theology and philosophy reflected on the question that the priest asks in *First Reformed*, "Will God Forgive Us?"

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