

The Meaning of Environmental Awareness Messages Signs through Film: Semiotic Analysis of Spirited Away Film

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Abstract

Environmental awareness is an issue that has never ended until now, both in the natural environment, social environment, and artificial environment. Global warming and crime rates that continue to increase are clear evidence that there are still many people who are not aware of the critical role of humans in protecting the environment. The film "Spirited Away" is one of the Japanese animated films that discuss environmental issues and won various awards, one of which was the Oscar award. This study aimed to determine the denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and the myth of environmental awareness in the Spirited Away film. This research is qualitative research with an interpretative paradigm. The results of this study show that seven scenes have the meaning of environmental awareness, such as globalization, the loss of cultural identity, destruction of the natural environment, global warming, capitalism, and human morals. Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away is a work inspired by actual events that happened to him. This shows that this Japanese animation conveys a message based on the reality of human life that is packaged using a Japanese cultural approach that can be used as an example for the world of cinema, especially animation in Indonesia, to produce original works that have deep meaning.

Keywords

environmental awareness;
semiotics; meanings; animation
film



I. Introduction

The film has become one of society's most influential and exciting means of mass communication. According to Bittner, mass communication is a message the mass media conveys to many people; it can be concluded that mass communication must use mass media (Toni & Fachrizal, 2017). Film as a mass medium began at the end of the 19th century, but the content and functions are still scarce. The film has become a real mass media in the sense that it can reach large populations quickly, even in rural areas (McQuail, 2011).

The film is an example of a popular form of media that displays personal, social, and cultural identities, which audiences can use in their search for identity. (Arsi & Sobur, 2019) According to Redi Panuju, films can be a suitable learning medium for the audience, not only as entertainment, but films are also able to convey direct messages through pictures, dialogues, and plays so that they become the most effective medium for spreading missions, ideas, campaigns, and so on (Asri, 2020).

The film "Spirited Away" is a Japanese animated film produced by Studio Ghibli in 2001, which became the anime to enter the Box Office and occupied the first position for 20 years by attracting the attention of about 23 million viewers. Which beat the film "Titanic."

This Japanese animated film in the fantasy genre has also won 58 awards and 31 world nominations. One of the prestigious awards it won was the 75th Academy Award for the best-animated film (Oscar) in 2003 (William, 2021). This film raises the theme of environmental issues that occurred in the late 1990s and is still relevant to current events.

One of the worst environmental damage ever occurred in Japan was in 1960, known as the Minamata tragedy, which was caused by poor processing and disposal of waste carried out by the Chisso Factory on Minamata Bay, resulting in chemical pollution. It was recorded that until 1990 it had claimed as many as 2,000 lives. 987 people (Setyorini, 2017).

In one of Miyazaki's interviews with the media, Miyazaki also recounted that one scene in *Spirited Away* he experienced himself when Miyazaki was doing social work cleaning the river, they found many piles of garbage in the river, not only plastic waste but household furniture such as refrigerators and even bicycles were thrown into the river (Haider, 2021).

In addition, in 2020, floods and landslides occurred on Kyushu Island, South of Japan, due to heavy rainfall. This caused dozens of people to be killed and dozens of people missing, and the government ordered 200,000 residents to evacuate (Garjito & Firdaus, 2020). Following a similar incident in 2021, the city of Atami in Japan experienced a landslide disaster caused by heavy rain that did not stop. This incident killed 4 people, and 64 people have not been found. This continuous rain is evidence of global warming causing extreme climate change (Landslide Update in Japan: 4 Dead, Dozens Missing, 2021).

In the same year, if it rains heavily in Atami, in the northern part of Tokyo and Ashikaga, it rarely rains, causing these two places to experience forest fires that for up to 5 days still cannot be contained (Sekarwati, 2021). In 2014, the same thing happened. As many as nine hectares of mountainous areas were burned when a forest fire broke out in Japan's Kiryuu City, southwest of Gunma Prefecture (Syafputri, 2014).

In Indonesia, the impact of environmental damage that we often feel is smog and water pollution. Almost every year, several cities in Indonesia are affected by the haze, especially in Sumatra and Kalimantan. Even the smog due to forest fires often impacts neighboring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia.

Through social media and mass media, we can also learn about the state of the sea in Indonesia, which is polluted by plastic waste and household waste that causes marine animals such as whales, turtles, and others to be injured and even die. In 2022, the seawater in the waters of the City of Bima, NTB, changed color to brown, with brown lumps, slippery and sticking to each other, allegedly coming from Pertamina waste located on the sea coast of Bima City (Viqi, 2022). In addition to the company's contribution, the community also contributes to the high number of plastic waste in Indonesia. Plastic Bank Indonesia noted that every year there are 4.9 million tons of plastic waste that is not appropriately managed, and 83 percent of plastic waste leaks into the sea and threatens the marine ecosystem (Awaliyah & Maharani, 2022). Waste management system that is not in accordance with the technical standards is due to the system of waste management that has not functioned optimally and the lack of concern of residents in waste management is one of the causes of the system has not run well (Tobing, 2021). The waste was significantly influenced by the socio-demographic characteristics of the households such as gender, age, income and residency (Huho, 2020).

Furthermore, there is research on the description of the 'Children in' ethnic group in Indonesian cinema, which is analyzed through two films, namely *Sokola Rimba* and *Lost in Papua*. This research, which uses Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, concludes that the 'Children's' tribe is often depicted as a primitive figure with a low intelligence level in Indonesian cinema. This film builds public awareness that primitive society still exists today (Rosalia, Krisdinanto, & Fiesta, 2019). The thing that distinguishes this research is the theory

used. Even though it is semiotic, the semiotics of Roland Barthes and Ferdinand de Saussure has different criteria because Roland Barthes' semiotics is a semiotic theory developed from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory. In addition, even though they both researched films that raised environmental issues, the above research focuses on the 'Anak Dalam' tribe, while this research is set in life in Japan.

From the description above, this study aims to determine the meaning of the environmental awareness message signs in the film *Spirited Away* so that people do not misinterpret the film's meaning without understanding the signs that appear in the film.

II. Research Methods

Based on the word, semiotics comes from the word *semeion*, which means sign in Latin, or *semeiotikos* which means sign interpretation in Greek. At first, modern semiotics came from the realm of linguistics, with one of the most famous figures from Switzerland, Ferdinand de Saussure (Ratmanto, 2004). The definition of semiotics, according to John Fiske, is a study of the signs and meanings of sign systems, how meaning is constructed in media texts, or the study of how signs of any type of work in society consume meaning (Fiske, 2018). This study uses a qualitative method with an interpretive paradigm with a semiological approach.

III. Discussion

3.1 “Spirited Away” Film Overview

The film “Spirited Away” or in Japan, known as “Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi” (Kidnapping of Sen and Chihiro), is a 2001 film directed by Hayao Miyazaki, an anime director and manga artist. Japan is one of the founders of Studio Ghibli. In 2002, *Spirited Away* won the Oscar in the Best Animated film category and became the first Japanese-language anime to win the award in that category. With the film's success, Pixar animator John Lasseter, a fan and friend of Hayao Miyazaki, invited his staff to watch the film. After watching the film, Lasseter responded positively so that Disney CEO Michael Eisner wanted to make an English adaptation of the film “Spirited Away” by making Lasseter an executive producer on the *project* (Riantrisnanto, 2014).

The storyline of the film “Spirited Away” tells the story of a 10-year-old girl named Ogino Chihiro who is forced to move to another city with her parents due to work problems. Chihiro and his family get lost in the unseen world in the middle of the journey. Upon entering the supernatural world, Chihiro's parents' impudent behavior turns them into pigs. Chihiro's adventure in the supernatural world to save his parents began with the help of Haku and his friends until finally, Chihiro and his parents were able to return to the human world.

3.2 Research Analysis of the Film “Spirited Away”

The film “Spirited Away,” which has a background in Japan in the late '90s, depicts many elements of culture, Shinto beliefs, and the actual situation in Japan. The analysis of this research is divided into three meanings, namely denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth.



Figure 1. *A Big Tree with Tiny Houses*

Source: <https://animasu.net/nonton-spirited-away/>

The depiction of story fragments in this film conveys various meanings, namely through denotative meanings that can be analyzed based on direct dialogue between Chihiro and his mother:

Chihiro: "What is that little house?"

Chihiro's mother: "It is a temple. People pray there."

The dialogue snippet translated from Netflix describes that the tree that contains the tiny houses is a temple which is a belief of the people in the area.

In terms of connotation, geographically, it looks like a winding and uphill road full of housing. This shows that in early 2000, infrastructure in Japan was progressing. However, on the one hand, we can see that the winding roads with this housing indicate that the place was once a forest in the mountains, a habitat for wild animals. In FIGURE 2, we can see that the big tree is the boundary between the paved road and the forest.

Then the myth of interpreting the big tree in picture 2 is Kodama. This is evidenced by the existence of a wooden carved door called the Torii. Torii is a barrier between the area where humans live and the sacred area where Kami (God or Shinto God) lives. Kodama is a type of spirit associated with trees in Japanese mythology. Kodama comes from the word ko, which means tree, and dama, which means soul, literally Kodama is a tree spirit which is the life of the tree itself. However, not all trees have Kodama. Only trees that reach a certain age have it, like old and big trees in the forest. In Shinto belief, Kodama works to protect the forest from all threats of danger (Meyer, 2012).

This is the same when humans burn forests or cut down illegal trees; the result is the spread of respiratory diseases that can kill humans, to landslides that harm humans from material to physical. (The Biggest Series of Fires in Indonesian History, 2021). Likewise, if humans maintain forest sustainability, the forest can carry out its function correctly, namely as a climate regulator, because the forest plays a role in absorbing CO₂ in the atmosphere through the process of photosynthesis and storing it in the form of biomass, besides that the forest can also emit CO₂ resulting from the process of respiration, decomposition. Moreover, decay is assisted by various ethnic bodies (Nurrochmat & Abdullah, 2014).



Figure 3. *Sentō*

Source: <https://animasu.net/nonton-spirited-away/>

Chimney *Sentō* makes the clouds in the sky also turn dark. This description is interpreted as air pollution that occurs due to the existence of *Sentō* (artificial hot springs) through its denotative meaning.

While the connotative meaning through the cut in FIGURE 3, the depiction of *Sentō* is a substantial private company, but behind the company's success is a victim, namely the environment. Air pollution due to factory smoke, river destruction symbolized by a dry river, and air pollution through factory smoke. On the dry river, it is also depicted that there are railroad tracks that are passed by old trains, symbolizing the waste that comes out of the factory continuously even though the condition of the river is already alarming.

From the researcher's point of view, the myth from FIGURE 3 has a meaning about the issue of the natural environment where a factory disposes of its waste carelessly, as happened in Bima City. Oil companies are suspected of dumping their waste on the beach, so the seawater turns brown (Viqi, 2022). A fish processing factory in Pengambengan Jembrana village, Bali, disposes of its waste into the sea without filtering, causing disruption to the marine ecosystem, causing a foul odor and itching (Fish Processing Plant Disposes of Waste into the Pengmbengan Sea, 2014). A pharmaceutical factory with the initials MEP disposes of factory waste containing paracetamol. This is included in marine pollution (Wiryono, 2021). In myth, judging from its history, the Chinese introduced this communal bathing place to Japan in the 6th century as a Buddhist practice believed to cure people from illness and other nasty things. These baths were initially only used by priests. However, over time, news of the benefits of these baths spread to the general public and nobles (Yuri, 2020).

Over time, *Sent* began to get a lot of praise and criticism because *Sentō* did not provide a separate place between women and men, so it was considered immoral. In the present, *Sentō* has been made separate between baths for men and women. The female workers in *Sentō* are referred to as *Yuna*. According to the history of the Edo Bakufu government, *Yuna* was tasked with helping guests scrub their backs and fill water like a maid in a public bathhouse. However, when the baths are about to close in the afternoon, some of the more paying customers can be entertained by the *yunas* (Anya, 2020).

From the explanation above, the researcher interprets the existence of *Sentō* in the film *Spirited Away* as a place of prostitution where young women and children are used as workers to serve guests, especially customers who come from customers with high economic status. Although nowadays, public baths do not provide 'entertainment' services anymore. This issue can still be found in other places such as hotels, nightclubs, and even online.

Currently, many cases of online prostitution are happening, one of which is a case of prostitution in a hotel in the West Jakarta area, which was raided by the police and arrested 22 minors. This incident also involved a pimp who was also a minor through the MiChat application (Lesmana & Yasir, 2022). Another case stems from the trafficking of 30 children from Jambi. They were sold by a 52-year-old man with the initials S alias Koko in Jakarta. This sales activity for children is assisted by two adult pimps and one underage pimp (Pebrianto, 2022).



Figure 4. *Chihiro's Parents Turned into Pigs*
Source: <https://animasu.net/nonton-spirited-away/>

The change of a human into a pig can be interpreted through the conversation between Chihiro's parents and Chihiro as a denotative meaning.

Chihiro's mother: "Wow, this is all great."

Chihiro's father: "Excuse me, is anyone here?"

Chihiro's mother: "Come on, Chihiro, it looks delicious."

Chihiro : (shakes head)

Chihiro's father: "Excuse me."

Chihiro's mother: "Do not worry, we can pay later after eating"

Chihiro's father: "Yeah, you are right. This looks so delicious."

Chihiro's mother: "I am curious about the food. Wow, that is delicious. Chihiro! It is delicious."

Chihiro: "I do not want to! Let us go. They will be furious."

Chihiro's father: "Do not worry. Dad is here. Daddy brought a credit card and cash."

From the dialogue snippet above, Chihiro has made it clear not to eat food without the owner's consent. However, his parents do not care about it and think everything can be solved with money.

In the opinion of the researcher, the connotative meaning of the change of Chihiro's parents into pigs is the fundamental human nature that resembles a pig because based on the sequencing of ovarian cDNA from pigs, it is found that genes have a high similarity with human genes (Jakaria & Suzuki, 2003). Moreover, pigs have the same traits as lazy and greedy. It is also described that the nature of Chihiro's parents, who ignore warnings from their children, is similar to most parents in Asia who tend to be stubborn. This laziness and greed are also the characteristics of corruptors who do not want to work hard but want to get as much profit as possible, such as the case of the Minister of Social Affairs, Juliari Batubara, who corrupted social assistance funds from the Ministry of Social Affairs for the lower class people affected by the effects of Covid-19, reaching more than 20 billion (Anzari & Fariza, 2021).

The myth in the snippet of FIGURE 4 is that Chihiro's parents, who eat more than enough, turn into pigs as a form of human greed. Western culture, namely buffets, often embrace eating in large portions. Eating as much as you like in a restaurant has become a trend in countries such as Indonesia and Japan. While in Japan, Okinawans have a culture of hard hachi bun me, taught by Confucius, which means do not eat until you are full but eat enough to eat 80% of your stomach capacity. By implementing Hara Hachi bun me, Okinawans are believed to get cancer, heart disease, and stroke rarely. They have a high life expectancy (Cahya, 2019).

The Japanese belief, namely Shintoism, believes that all objects, both living and dead, are considered to have spirits and are considered to have power that affects the lives of their adherents (Mulyadi, 2017). From the Shinto concept, the researcher draws its connection with the culture of hard hachi bun me, which means that humans should not consume excessively to maintain the balance of nature. So that humans and nature can coexist. Suppose humans do excessive consumption in the future. In that case, the food supply will run low, and animals will become rare and even extinct, so humans can only eat plants.



Figure 5. Spirit Radish

Source: <https://animasu.net/nonton-spirited-away/>

The scene when the Radish Spirit pays respect to Chihiro after Chihiro pays respects to him who has protected Chihiro is a form of mutual respect between humans and other living things, which is the denotative meaning in FIGURE 5.

Meanwhile, this connotative meaning is analyzed by describing the Radish Spirit character who uses a sake bowl on his head to symbolize food humans often waste. The shape of the Spirit Radish's enormous body measured how much humans often waste food. Even though many news stories cover many people who are starving like people on the African continent, the fact is that there are still many countries that waste food. This is by the fact that there is a lot of food waste is wasted. Indonesia is ranked second as the country that produces food waste or the highest food waste in the world. A report notes that the average Indonesian person wastes around 300 kg of food every year. The first position is Saudi Arabia, with a total of 427 kg per person per year. In comparison, the United States occupies the third position with a total of 277 kg per person per year (Khairunnisa, 2020).

In Shinto belief, Oshira-sama (おしら様) is the God of the house worshiped in the Tohoku region of Japan. Generally, Oshira-sama is considered the God of silkworms, agriculture, and horses (StoryDive, 2019). In the Spirited Away film, Oshira-sama, in the form of a turnip, is interpreted that the food product represented in the form of a turnip has a significant meaning like a god, so it must be respected without food, humans cannot carry on their life. White radish in Japanese is referred to as Daikon. It has various benefits for the health of the human body because Daikon contains a source of antioxidants such as pyrogallol, vanillic acid, and other phenolic compounds. Daikon has ten benefits: boosting the immune system, losing weight, keeping from chronic diseases, keeping skin healthy, preventing liver damage, improving bone health, antimicrobial, healthy digestion, healthy kidneys, and preventing the potential for cancer (Fajri, 2003). 2021).

From the researcher's point of view, the form of the God Oshira, who often helps Chihiro, is interpreted as the benefits of white radish, which play a role in maintaining human health. This reminds us always to be people who help preserve nature, like white radish, which helps maintain human health.



Figure 6. River God

Source: <https://animasu.net/nonton-spirited-away/>



Figure 7. Haku

Source: <https://animasu.net/nonton-spirited-away/>

Through its denotative meaning, FIGURE 6 can be interpreted through the characters' actions. When Yubaba realizes that the Rotten Spirit is the God of the River, all workers at Sentō Aburaya work together to remove the 'thorns' stuck in the Rotten Spirit's body. After being pulled out, the household wastes come out, and the Rotten Spirit shows its proper form, namely the River God.

Meanwhile, in FIGURE 7, there is a snippet of the dialogue between Haku and Chihiro while riding Haku in the form of a Dragon Spirit:

Chihiro: "Haku, listen, I do not remember this. But my mother once told me,
 When I was little, I fell into the river. The mother said they drained the river
 and built a building on it. However, I just remembered, the river is called. Its
 name is Kohaku River. Your real name is Kohaku, right?"
 (Haku's form in the form of a dragon turns into the form of a human child)
 Haku: "Chihiro! Thank you very much. My real name is Nigihayami Kohakunushi"
 Chihiro: "A good name like a Guardian Spirit."
 Haku: "I also remember how you fell on top of me when you were little. You dropped
 your shoes."
 Chihiro: "Yes, you brought me to the shallow waters of Kohaku. I am thankful."

The two pieces of this scene have the meaning of river pollution and destruction of the river. In FIGURE 6, the aquatic environment is destroyed by throwing garbage in the river. In contrast, FIGURE 7 is a form of river destruction that is intentionally carried out to dry up the river so that apartments for humans can be built.

After that, the connotation interpreted by the river god who went to Aburaya to clean his body was a metaphorical message criticizing a polluted river that could not be recognized as a river but a sewer that made the river unable to carry out its functions properly and needed maintenance.

In an interview, Hayao Miyazaki also said that the depiction of the river god in his film was inspired by his personal experience of enjoying his retirement and vacationing with his friends. While he was doing social work, their team found much garbage from household waste, factory waste, to bicycles in the river (Haider, 2021). Besides the River God, Haku's role is also related to the river. Haku is a metaphorical form of the drained and stockpiled river. When the river is drained and stockpiled, it can no longer function, or it can be said that the river is dead.

In addition, rivers have essential functions for humans in various aspects of life. The river does not only function as a transportation route but the river also plays a role in economic activity as a livelihood for the local community, a source of power generation, an ecosystem center, an irrigation source, and a means of socialization to learn the culture of the community (Rochgiyanti, 2011).

Many cases of indiscriminate dumping have resulted in disturbing marine ecosystems. This is illustrated by Dewa Sungai, which is likened to a marine ecosystem. From this

description, the meaning of connotation in the view of the researcher, the depiction of the Dewa Sungai is a form of criticism to the people who still often throw garbage carelessly, especially in waters like what is happening in Indonesian waters. This garbage can cause coral reefs to die because they are covered in garbage and cannot photosynthesize. Other than that, other marine animals such as fish, turtles, and jellyfish think the garbage is food which causes the animals to get injured (Ramadhani, 2018).

The activity that the River God does in FIGURE 6 when it is polluted is called Misogi. The myth of Misogi is the practice of a Shinto ritual, namely purification by bathing. This concept also applies to the gods in Shinto belief. In Japanese mythology, after Izanagi escaped from the underworld and disaster, Izanagi bathed in a river to purify himself (StoryDive, 2019). The gods who come to Aburaya also aim for self-purification from outside disturbances.

In an interview with Hayao Miyazaki to the media in 2005, Miyazaki asked experts about what kind of environmental conditions the explanation the experts said that this environmental condition is expected to last 50 years if mass consumption continues. Miyazaki says he wants to live another 30 years to see Tokyo turning into an ocean, the NTV building into an island, and Manhattan on the ocean floor. Money and ambition will crumble, and the weeds will take over (Haider, 2021).

Japanese people believe that humans and nature coexist and that every living thing, including inanimate objects, has a life. This has also been proven through research by Masaru Emoto, a Japanese researcher who researched water crystals. From Miyazaki's interview with the media, the researcher argues that the Japanese people believe Tokyo was once an ocean with an element of water. The results of his research state that water crystals are more geometric, beautiful, and aesthetic when given a positive message. In contrast, when given a negative message, water crystals are chaotic and non-uniform. Even the water crystals prayed for have a more beautiful shape. This experiment proves that water can store vibrations and transfer energy, so many religious teachings use water as a medium to purify and heal themselves (Emoto, 2011).

According to Japanese people's beliefs, the world consists of the ideal world, namely the natural world and the world of knowledge that goes on continuously, involving the universe and human knowledge. Consciously or not, Japanese people realize that life must be in harmony between themselves, their environment, and even ghosts who are considered gods. Moral harmony and dependence on nature are felt by humans so that humans realize that harmony should not be disturbed by any external forces. Humans, as the highest power, do not show truth and virtue but exist in the meaning and grace of Amaterasu Oomikami (Lawanda, 2008).

Although this film was made with an element of belief in Japan, the meanings are very relevant to the situation worldwide, including in Indonesia. For the Japanese, water is a source of human life because, in biological anatomy, humans contain 60% of water in their bodies. Hence, humans need water from their environment, such as rivers, seas, lakes, and so on (Lawanda, 2008). The message conveyed through this film reminds people to work together to protect the environment to protect our future. Of course, even though experts have said that the age of the earth will not last long, Miyazaki still tries to convince the public that we still have hope and continue to persuade people through animation work.

IV. Conclusion

Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* film produced by Studio Ghibli certainly has differences from animated films. Especially with its achievements as a film that has won many awards from local to international awards such as the Oscars, it certainly has many advantages both in terms of visuals, audio, and the meaning and message of the story.

When viewed in denotative meaning, many persuasive conversations are aimed at teenagers for polite and moral behavior. In terms of connotative meaning, Hayao often uses the depiction of situations and his iconic characters that have their meaning from the depiction. Then on the myth, *Spirited Away* includes so many elements of Japanese culture that are satire, where Hayao Miyazaki criticizes the Japanese government for often destroying and disturbing the balance of nature, as a form of Hayao's love for the environment.

Seeing this phenomenal work, of course, is an example for the film industry, especially the Indonesian animation section, which at this time has not developed so that it can spread its wings like other countries that produce many famous animations. Animated films can also be a tool to introduce Indonesia's diverse culture to the world. Of course, by incorporating cultural elements into animated films that target young people with a positive approach to society so that people can love culture instead of being afraid of superstitious things.

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