



The animism in animation through the example of the film *Son of the white mare (Fehérlófia)*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the ways the film *Son of the White Mare* uses in order to merge the theory of animism in its themes and form.

KEYWORDS: Animism, Animation, Tree, Soul, Cycle, Style, Form, Essence

I. The sanctity of trees

Filmed in 1981, *Son of the White Mare* (Jankovics, *Fehérlófia*, 1981), a traditional Hungarian animated film by Marcell Jankovics (1941-2021), is inspired by the Hungarian folklore legend of the "tree-tamer" Fehérlófia.

The large tree, that the hero attempts to lift since he is a child, refers to the tree of life (Photo 1). This symbol has been used many times in art and it has religious and ritual meanings. The sanctity of trees as creators and givers of life is a characteristic and integral element of animist peoples and folklore throughout the world (James, 1968).

The importance of trees, in various cultures and religions of humanity, is extremely significant. Their worship as incarnations of spiritual essence, as dwellings of deities and as symbols of fertility and life is a common, animistic idea found in various peoples throughout the world.



Photo 1. *Son of the white mare* (Jankovics, *Fehérlófia*, 1981)

Most, if not all of the world's tribes, at some period of their development, had the tree as a "body" hosting a soul. As an embodiment of a spiritual essence, capable of independent life and activity.

Capable of detaching itself from its material environment and appearing in human or animal form. It is doubtful whether there is a country in the world where the tree has not been approached, at



some time, with awe. As a conduit for connection with spiritual powers (Philpot, 1897).

This belief has left innumerable traces in ancient art and literature. It has greatly shaped the customs and legends of the peoples of the Earth and has influenced the rituals of almost all the primitive, animistic religions of humanity (Philpot, 1897).

Regarding Japanese animism, *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997) has a characteristic representation of souls residing in trees (Kodama, 木霊, 木魂 or 木魅). Belief in the spirits-gods of trees led to worship and propitiatory rituals, not only on the part of the Japanese but also of many other communities, who perceived the soul as an entity residing within the elements of nature.

There are legends of various cultures that depict trees as ancestors of the human race, as symbols of reproductive energy and as conduits of transmigration. There is also the idea of the universe-tree, a cosmological concept found in different mythologies worldwide, symbolizing the interconnected relationship of all existential manifestations of the world (Philpot, 1897).

The world as a tree and the peoples as its roots is an image of ancient animism. Furthermore, due to the connection of the roots with the Earth and the extension of the branches towards the sky, the tree of life is considered as a bridge between Earth and the beyond. Between human and the divine. Between matter and spirit (Philpot, 1897).

All the oldest traditions agree on the connection of paradise with one or more miraculous trees, or with some legendary mountain. From these elements it can be reasonably concluded that these stories date back to the era of primitive cosmogony, when the heavens were supposed to be supported by a material support (Philpot, 1897).

Therefore, in at least one of its aspects, the tradition of Christian paradise must be understood as an “offshoot” of the animistic beliefs about the sanctity of trees. In extension, the sanctity of all nature (Philpot, 1897).

Tree worship has been a widespread and enduring aspect of human spirituality and cultural heritage. The sun, the moon, the stars, sacred springs, stones, mountains, animals, have all been

approached by Man as psychic entities. As forces and energies that establish and symbolize some divine principle (Philpot, 1897).

However, no other form has spread so widely, has left behind such persistent traces, or has had such a narrow resonance in modern societies as the worship of the tree (Philpot, 1897).

II. Horses, stars and cycles

The attempt of the Son of the white mare to tame the tree is an attempt to communicate with the world of the gods. To tame life, existence, the cosmogenic dimension, the universal essence. When he succeeds, he acquires divine powers. He becomes a demigod, a sacred image.

The power that Feherlofia exerts, in order to lift the tree, comes from breastfeeding. His mother, the white mare, is a symbol of pure, unadulterated spirituality. The horse, especially one with a white or black body, plays a role of decoder in the legends of the peoples (Mohammadieh, Radmanesh, Chatraei, 2016).

Often, black corresponds to mourning and darkness. In Europe, the color black is viewed negatively. In most cultures, white has positive symbolism. Semiologically, the white and black horse have diverse and important roles in the myths and perceptions of the peoples. The white horse is “solar”, associated with the chariot of the star and the kingdom of the soul. The shining white of the horse is a symbol of dignity and grandeur (Mohammadieh, Radmanesh, Chatraei, 2016).

The stellar aspect of the white horse is highlighted by the visual semiotics of the film. It is evident in the scene of the transformation of the mother-horse into a star (Photo 2), after her death (00:21:20).

There is also the symbol of the cycle of life that encompasses all the heroes, like an egg (00:82:00). Circularity reflects the circularity of the soul and the existential continuum in a similar way with animistic Japanese anime films (Photo3). We encounter it many times, in films such as *Angel's egg* (Oshii, 1985), *The Boy and the Beast* (Hosoda, 2015) and others.



Photos 2, 3. *Son of the white mare* (Jankovics, *Fehérlófia*, 1981)

III. The form is the essence

Jankovics proves to be a lover of the art of painting and the possibilities of visual representation. His film articulates an animistic proposal mainly through its aesthetics and peculiar animation. The lines of the drawing and their mobility have a fluidity that refers to the concepts of change and

transformation. Animism as a perceptual philosophy of life is connected to the art of animation, meaning giving soul, life, movement to inanimate drawings or objects. So, animism and animation encounter, in the film, an extremely expressive representational realization.

In *Son of the White mare*, animation as an idea and animation as a cinematic technique are



combined with a unique visual approach. The design and chromatic representation are so vivid that the work seems to animate the very nature of animism in each of its frames. It transforms the animistic, cyclic idea of all things beings parts of one whole, into images. Just as Eisenstein identified the connection between animation and animism (Lamarre, 2018).

The pattern of alteration and constant merging of shapes, colors and forms reflects the transformation of ideas within a cosmic whole, but also the kinship and coexistence of all hypostases, based on animism.

Ideas and visual representations follow each other in an endless dance of how, in the audiovisual arts, the subject can arise from the image. As a result, the disparagement that a work of artis sometimes over-stylized as an argument that style is achieved at the expense of some substance, proves to be a one-dimensional and simplistic interpretation of visual creation.

A work of audiovisual art is, by definition, an aesthetic, stylistic proposal. Cinema and animation cinema are, above all, visual communication. This aesthetic, this style, augment or even constitute the themes of the film. Jankovics creates a film of orgiastic, almost psychedelic transformation. This way the film delivers a visual proposal on the variability of the soul and the flexibility of the spirit, within the cosmic whole.

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Filmography

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