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Carnavalesque Ecoterrorism in *Pom Poko*

TODD ANDREW BORLIK

Much about Takahata Isao's *Pom Poko*, beginning with its title, will seem baffling to Western viewers. Although it was the highest grossing film in Japan in 1994, it has not garnered a cult following in North America or Europe comparable to other Ghibli productions. But this is as it should be. The film is, after all, a seriocomic elegy on the destruction of place and the displacement of Japan's traditional folklore by the entertainment empires of global capital. The story relates the increasingly desperate efforts of a band of *tanuki* (raccoon dogs native to Japan) to save their woodland habitat from a suburban housing development. Remastering their legendary powers of transformation, some of the pluckier tanuki sabotage the construction sites. Western viewers accustomed to thinking of animated film as a children's genre may be taken aback not only by *Pom Poko*'s apparent glorification of ecoterrorism but also by the tanukis' chief weapon turning out to be their scrotums, which they can inflate at will to elephantine proportions.

In a piercing ecocritical appraisal of anime, Ursula Heise upholds the shape-shifting tanuki in *Pom Poko* as prime specimens of the genre's "plasmatic body" (2014, 313–14). In addition to being plasmatic, the bodies of the tanuki are also—in the sense described by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin—grotesque. The two characteristics are, after all, related. But while the former offers a striking metaphor for adaptation, the latter provides a means of resistance. Drawing on Japanese folklore as well as Bakhtinian theory, this review vets *Pom Poko* as a study in the

ecological carnivalesque. In this case, however, the dynamic of low culture lampooning high culture described by Bakhtin is reconfigured in the animus of the animal world against the human and of traditional Japan against global modernity. It is noteworthy, therefore, that several of the bawdy and distinctively Japanese elements in *Pom Poko* are muted in the English-dubbed version of the film distributed by Disney in 2005. Fittingly, the film's adaptation for release in the Western market mirrors the environmental adaptation forced on the tanuki by the destruction of their forest. The ending of the film, in which the tanuki blend in with human society, appears to portray a grudging assimilation to modernity and its imperatives. By focusing on aspects of *Pom Poko* that defy translation, a more nuanced reading will suggest that this assimilation is purely superficial. *Pom Poko* does not so much dismiss resistance in favor of resilience but effectively conflates the two.

Perhaps even more than most Studio Ghibli films, *Pom Poko* needs to be rooted in the cultural, historical, and ecological context of postwar Japan. Takahata hints as much in the full title of the film in Japanese: *Heisei tanuki gassen ponpoko* (The Heisei Era War of the Raccoon Dog Pom Poko). First off, it should be noted that the Heisei Era began in 1989. At the start of the film, the narrator informs us that the Tama Hills housing project broke ground in Showa 42, that is, 1967 by the Western calendar. Yet the word Heisei in the title locates the story in the present; one might even assume that the war (*gassen*) is ongoing. As for the physical setting and *casus belli*, Tama Hills is a real place on the southwestern fringes of Tokyo that was in fact the site of a massive housing development in the 1960s. This is not a mythical fable, in other words, but a stark portrayal of actual environmental degradation imagined from a nonhuman animal's point of view. The film's animal protagonists, meanwhile, are members of a species found only in eastern Asia. Often crudely translated as raccoon or badger, the tanuki actually belong to the canine family. "Raccoon dog" is somewhat more accurate, though it might erroneously suggest a dog that hunts raccoons. Hence it seems best to leave it untranslated. Unlike American raccoons, tanuki occupy a prominent place in Japanese folklore as trickster figures. *Pom Poko* draws on legends of their magical ability to metamorphose, first recorded in print in the early eighteenth century. It is, therefore, significant that the film portrays the tanuki in three different visual styles. In the opening sequence, they are drawn naturalistically, resembling real tanuki in the wild. For the majority of the

film, however, they appear in anthropomorphic form; they walk upright, dress in Japanese clothes, speak, and so forth. Finally, during moments of weakness or mischief, they are represented in a conspicuously cartoonish fashion (an homage to the work of Japanese manga artist Shigeru Sugiyura). On a metacinematic level, these transformations penned by the Ghibli animators brilliantly mimic the transformations executed by the tanuki within the film.

To better appreciate the significance of the plasmatic body in *Pom Poko*, it might be worthwhile to invoke Bakhtin's remarks on the "playful treatment of plant, animal, and human forms" in Renaissance *grotesca*:

The borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed. . . . There was no longer the movement of finished forms, vegetable or animal, in a finished and stable world; instead the inner movement of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into the other. (Bakhtin 1984, 32)

This is precisely the universe limned in *Pom Poko*. If classical *grotesca* spring from the same pagan sensibility as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the tanuki depicted by Ghibli might be said to embody the protoecological worldview of Japanese Shinto and Buddhism. The former is animistic, accrediting nature with spirit and sentience, while the latter regards form as a delusion, so that everything melds into everything else. But while Buddhism preaches transcendence of earthly vicissitudes, the tanuki embrace the material world, incarnating its fluidity. According to Bakhtin, exaggerated depictions of the mouth, belly, and genitals serve as salubrious reminders that humans are biological organisms, emphatically connected to the rest of the nonhuman world (1984, 26). With their shape-shifting, protruding stomachs, outsized scrotums, and *joie de vivre*, the inconsistently anthropomorphic tanuki exemplify the grotesque body as anatomized by Bakhtin. This is a key plank in the film's environmental message. As Michael McDowell has argued, the "carnavalesque champions [a] non-intellectual, bodily way of knowing the world" (1996, 381) that dovetails neatly with a biocentric ethos.

At first blush it may seem Eurocentric to apply Bakhtin's theories on the carnivalesque to a Japanese film. However, *Pom Poko* repeatedly invokes Japan's *matsuri* (or festival) culture, which bears (in certain respects) an uncanny resemblance to the carnival tradition in medieval Europe. The tanuki in *Pom Poko* have an irrepressible urge to party on

the slightest pretext. For instance, during a funeral service for one of the humans killed by their ecoterrorist insurgency, the younger tanuki erupt in giggles. The solemn ceremony swiftly becomes a raucous celebration—one that challenges the assumption that a human life is inherently worth more than the forest ecology.

The tanuki also have gargantuan appetites, especially for human food. In one scene, their strategy meeting is derailed by a bag of hamburgers, which in the Japanese version are explicitly scavenged from “MacDonaldo’s” (a company with whom Disney was then in a lucrative cross promotional partnership). Several scenes portray the tanuki sifting through garbage. Surprisingly, *Pom Poko* provides a charitable view of this suburban ecosystem, at least in the low-density developments of the pre-World War II era, in which humans and the natural world could peaceably coexist. In a memorable scene, the tanuki, flush with victory from their first ecoterrorist sally, resolve to permit a few humans to remain in Tama Hills so they can continue to feast on their leftovers. Given the tanuki’s fondness for food, it is no surprise that Japanese folklore depicts them with potbellies of Falstaffian dimensions. In point of fact, tanuki eat voraciously in the autumn and put on considerable weight, as they are one of the only canine species to hibernate. Fattening themselves (a modest form of shape-shifting) is a survival technique to adapt to the harsh Japanese winters.

In Japanese folklore, the tanuki also enjoy pounding on their distended stomachs. Unbeknownst to many Western viewers of the film, the phrase *pom poko* is an onomatopoeic rendering of the sound produced by their tummy drumming. By making joyful music from their potbellies, the tanuki celebrate “the earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1984, 19–20), which Bakhtin proclaims as the essence of carnival.

The stomach is not the only disproportionate part of the tanuki’s anatomy. The protagonists of *Pom Poko* are not merely anatomically correct but hyperendowed. Takahata and his collaborators did not invent this; depictions of the tanuki’s enormous scrotum appear in traditional folktales, woodblock prints, and statuary. In a memorable scene in *Pom Poko*, the oldest tanuki, Osho, reveals that the red carpet on which everyone is sitting is in fact his scrotum. The unabashed portrayal of the tanuki’s reproductive organs evidently flummoxed Disney. In both the English audio track and subtitles of the DVD, the Japanese

word for scrotum or testicles, *kintama* (literally, “golden balls”), is translated as “pouch.” This misleadingly implies that the tanuki is a marsupial. Worse, it effectively bowdlerizes the film.

Pom Poko makes several references to the tanuki’s testicles, often at moments in which they are rebelling against the human usurpation of their habitat. Some of these references are lifted from oral folktales or popular culture, such as this children’s song, sung by a group of young tanuki after they roll a construction vehicle off a cliff:

Tan tan tanuki no kintama e
Kaze mo nai no ni bu-ra bura.
Sore o mite ita kodanuki wa
Isho ni nani shite bura bura
[Tan tan tanuki’s testicles
Even on a windless day,
Back and forth they sway, sway, sway.
The tanuki cubs looked on,
All together now they sway, sway, sway]

Hilariously, the melody for this song was lifted from a Christian hymn:

Shall we gather at the river
Where bright angel feet have trod
With its crystal tide forever
Flowing by the throne of God?

The Japanese version is a perfect example of carnivalesque subversion, mocking the spiritual, otherworldly values of the hegemonic foreign culture by insisting on the primacy of the body. In the English version of the film released by Disney, the lyrics about the tanuki’s *kintama* are changed to the following:

We smashed your tractor now you’ll moan and groan,
But you made our home a construction zone.
If you don’t want to be so accident-prone,
Keep off our forest and we’ll leave you alone.

To state the obvious, this is miles away from the letter of the original. In spirit, however, the English version is strangely faithful. If grotesque realism celebrates the alliance between the body and the earth, singing about their scrotums amounts to a protest against the forest’s destruc-

tion. After all, it is the vanishing of their habitat that forces the tanuki—with much reluctance—to forego breeding.

It is, therefore, weirdly appropriate that the tanuki use their grotesque bodies as weapons in their ecoterrorist resistance. In one scene, they deploy their scrotums like parachutes to execute an aerial assault against the workers clear-cutting the forest. The leader of the resistance, Gonta, expands his scrotum to cover the windshield of a truck until the panicked driver plunges over a cliff. Another tanuki transforms his scrotum into a bridge, retracting it at the last moment so a construction vehicle plummets into a precipice. In a later scene, Gonta wields his scrotum like a huge flail to chase away a worker carrying a chainsaw.

Eventually, the film suggests that ecoterrorism is a futile tactic, and the plot rejects it in favor of adaptation. The surviving tanuki take on human form and go to work for their nemesis, the entertainment company *Wondarando*, in a premonition of the then-impending partnership between Studio Ghibli and Disney. In the final scene, however, a group of tanuki revert to their animal form and begin a joyous celebration on a golf course. This ending implies that the Westernization of Japan is superficial. Beneath their business suits, the Japanese retain their cultural identity, just as nature persists even in Tokyo. In the Bakhtinian reading of the film advanced in this review (which is simply not as available to viewers of the bowdlerized Disney version), the tanuki's resilience is also, in effect, a rebellion. The dogged survival of the tanuki reflects that of Studio Ghibli, with its conspicuously Japanese aesthetic, in an industry dominated by Disney. Insofar as the shape-shifting tanuki incarnate the illustrator's art, *Pom Poko* is a bravura demonstration of anime as the cultural steward of Japan's animistic heritage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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