


The Minimalist Poetics of Ecology: A Study of *The Red Turtle*

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ABSTRACT

Michael Dudok De Wit's film *The Red Turtle* is primarily a work of fiction for the modern times which are ravaged by widespread debates and world summits centred around the direction in which the future of humanity on our planet is headed towards. It was made in a minimalist style, with a limited number of characters and no dialogue, hence giving the film a universal scope which is free from linguistic barriers. For this reason, certain symbolic elements that reflect the ecological notions of contemporary times have taken on importance in the narrative. By highlighting these aspects, the narrative further delves into the dichotomy of nature and culture and the intricate links between both which resurface even in the midst of man's isolation from society on an island. The protagonist's constant efforts for reinstating himself with society, the visual representation of his dreamscape and the small objects which serve as evidence of human civilization probe into deeper ontological questions of why we constantly strive to reinterpret the surrounding nature with our proper meanings and likewise derive particular categories out of universal abstractions. For the most part, this article analyses the aforementioned questions from the father's perspective, and the viewer can effectively relate with his turmoil as to having been separated from the society in which he grew up. The subsequent parts of the article present a quasi-hypothetical situation to the viewer by analysing the perspective of his son, a boy who has no knowledge about society per se as he was born and raised on the island. The open ending of the film is the final stage of analysis with which the article has in effect presented a conclusive stance with regard to the ecological concerns of our times during the Anthropocene era.

Keywords: *Minimalism, ecology, poetics, symbolism, nature, culture, ontology, particular, universal.*

Introduction

All works of art and literature can be understood as representations of fragments of life, and the artist tries to present his vision of the world through his works. Michael Dudok De Wit's animated film *The Red Turtle* is one such work where poignant reflections have been presented from the director's ideological convictions. (Prime Video: The Red Turtle) The director has

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tried to present his personal interpretation of life as a whole through his film. Instead of focusing on a particular thematic element drawn from the vast web of life, here the director has taken life itself as a dilemma to which he attempts to respond through the film. This study attempts to shed light on how minimalism has been employed in the film, the reasons for and effects of the minimalist approach on the viewer, and the symbolic poetics embodied through this approach to representing ecological phenomena.

Minimalism is a concept that reduces the elements of reality to their essence and can therefore be explained as an abstraction of reality itself. Although it is focused here on the aspect of minimalism in relation to animated film, minimalism as a formal artistic movement had first begun in the field of art. It emerged as a reaction to the expressionist style of painting after the Second World War. The Minimalism movement is often linked to similar movements of the time, such as monochrome art. Painters drew their frames with a minimal number of colours, justifying their approach with the idea that they focused their work on the materiality of each colour and asserting that colours don't need to be mixed to metaphorically symbolize anything different from their essence, and instead represent colour itself as a whole rather than as fragments of something different from its essence. Because of this definition of minimalist art, minimalist artwork has often been associated with lofty qualities such as truth, realism and justice. (Tate) The messy, chaotic and complex elements of life are condensed by this approach into their most primitive forms.

But this definition of minimalism is not equally applicable to its use in cinema. This is because minimalism did not arise as a formal movement in the cinema of any particular period. Although the practice of minimalist films increased after the Second World War, with films that reflected their own temporality instead of action films. (Deleuze) For this reason, there is no concrete definition that can be used to describe what is meant by a minimalist film. This may depend on a variety of factors, to include a diverse category of films such as low-budget films, short films, films with little or no dialogue and many other factors. It can therefore be said that the images presented throughout the film encapsulate a wide range of ideas that would otherwise take a longer time to convey for a work of realistic fiction. Or we might conclude that the majority of films that attempt to offer a representation of the concept of life in general will often be forced to adopt a minimalist approach due to the seriousness of the subject matter. This minimalist approach is evident in the works of auteurs such as Yasujiro Ozu. The cinematic images in Ozu's films are defined by their lack of content and fixed shots with little or no movement at all (Choudhary).

Nature is Emotionless

The Red Turtle is one such film that is wrapped in minimalism. Minimalism isn't just limited to a thematic level in this film. It's evident in many other aspects of the film, such as the direction in general, the number of characters presented, the animation style, the dialogue free narration and also, as mentioned above, the thematic level. The director's choice to make a two-dimensional animated film instead of an ordinary feature film is a necessity that evokes poetic symbolism on several occasions throughout the film. Had the director opted for a more realistic representation, the messages embedded in the film would not have been conveyed as effectively to the viewer.

Indeed, the film's elements of dreamlike fantasy indirectly convey to the viewer the message that the images depicted are not to be taken in their literal sense, but are to be interpreted on a figurative level, as symbols and metaphors that are meant to indicate deeper meanings and alternative interpretations of reality. Like meaning in discourse, or signification in language, symbols have a wide range of interpretations depending on the context in which they are used. They are used to convey several types of tropes, which is why they are called polytropic symbols. (Todorov)

But it's not the choice of filming it as an animated movie that interests the viewer. Rather, it's the poetic level of the film that is being analysed. By the term 'poetic', what is meant is the effect at a symbolic level and the emotions evoked by the film. The total number of characters in the film and the animation style can be seen as a sub-theme of the broader framework that is the aspect of thematic minimalism. As mentioned above, the central theme of *The Red Turtle* is the perspective of life, which the director has interpreted in his own way. The film's plot revolves around the individual who is constantly working with his destiny. It's worth noting here how the film begins. The viewer receives no kind of introduction as to the protagonist's name or background. Had this been any other film, the viewer would first have been introduced to the individual's social and personal background, his position in society and the period in which the story takes place. This would give the viewer a historical and political grounding enabling them to grasp the situation more realistically. But the minimalist storytelling style employed in *The Red Turtle* does not indulge in such an introduction to the protagonist. On the contrary, from the very first scene of the film, we see the image of a helpless person fighting for survival against the storm that surrounds him.

From the outset, the story leads the viewer to an image often presented in art. The image of man engaged in a constant struggle against the forces of nature to ensure his survival. It's a recurring image that keeps repeating itself throughout the film's narrative. It's a trope that has been used repeatedly in art and literature. Other examples of works that have dealt with this unnatural man concept are *Old Man and The Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. In *The Red Turtle*, it is presented in a variety of drawings and pictorial representations, but the essence of all these images is to present the duality of man in relation to nature. (Gurko)

Due to several clichés which have been recurring in films, viewers often tend to associate any literary representation of nature or any descriptions concerning it with an overly romanticized and inflated worldview that has also become quite outdated. While this is the perspective of a socially privileged class of people who tend to have this fetishization for nature, *The Red Turtle* is an exception to this. Because here, the director does not shy away from presenting the hardships and suffering that are the most characterizing element which portrays man's quest for survival against all material odds presented by nature. By not trivializing this central aspect and by engaging the viewer through the minimalist depiction of life, the film's metanarrative is formed with representations of the forces of nature and the presence of a universal force that determines the film's sub-layers such as aspects of fate and destiny.

However, the theme of fatality presented in this film is not a tragic or pessimistic vision of life. It is in no way comparable to religious ideas such as man's eternal damnation. On the contrary, the way nature is portrayed throughout the film is like a quasi-objective force that has no concern whatsoever for man, nor does it lead directly to his demise. This vision of nature in the film is reminiscent of the way Sree Narayana Guru had represented nature through his teachings, that nature or God is an almost emotionless entity that does not interfere directly with man's actions. (Shankara) Similarly, the film does not represent nature as a force that creates obstacles for the protagonist. Rather, it is a link that leads to the ultimate goal of man's self-realization of his existence. This idea of God's silence is part of the minimalist approach evident in the film's total absence of dialogue. The director has chosen not to provide interpretations on metaphysical subjects that transcend the materiality of the physical, tangible world. The human emotions of helplessness, anger, guilt and happiness in the film represent the human consciousness that is innate to humans and not attributed to an entity that exists above. The absence of language, which is an important element of the minimalist approach, further underlines the postulates proposed by Wittgenstein, who questions the efficacy of

language itself as an insufficient medium for representing reality in his seminal work, *Tractatus*. (Gill) It is remarkable to note how this film was able to work against the commonly held notion that animated films, especially silent films, will never be able to convey the same emotional depth as seen in regular feature films.

Minimalist Elements

A definition was provided earlier as to what minimalism is and how it was used as an effective tool in the film. As minimalism tends to reduce the major thematic elements of a story into condensed forms or abstractions, we can see how this definition is also applicable in the film *The Red Turtle*. The duality of man versus nature is the major thematic subtext of the first half of the film (Barry). The concept of humanity is encapsulated through the protagonist's actions, which occur in order to ensure his survival. The symbolic elements used to represent the film's artificial realm are not as extensive as the symbolic elements used to represent nature. The film's artificial symbols, with the exception of the image of the man in trouble, are that of an empty glass bottle on the shore and the raft that the protagonist builds with bamboo sticks. It's worth noting that, apart from these two objects, there are no other physical objects in the film to represent the artificial side of life. And we don't know for sure where the glass bottle on the uninhabited island comes from. But then again, it serves a purpose and acts as a tool for the young boy to collect water.

In this way, we can say that the presence of the bottle is proof that man is by birth a social being, and that no man can exist as an isolated being. He constantly searches for meaning even in his phases of complete isolation as this is a primary tendency of the human mind. The artificiality and the artificial objects are an extension and a final product of this search effectuated by humans during each stage of their existence. In this manner, the glass bottle and raft which are built by the man can be broadly categorized as the particular categories which are derived out of universal (ontological) essence of nature and its resources. Man finds solace through such acts of leaving his footprints on the sands of time to mark his own singularity. A comparison can be made between the protagonist's existence on the island and the isolated life Henry David Thoreau lived (Thoreau).

Alongside these objects that link man to man, and the man-made tools that are always connected to oneself on totally isolated islands, there is another symbol that proves the fact that man can never totally separate himself from his deep-rootedness within the boundaries of human civilization which were always an essential mould for his upbringing, even when

landing shipwrecked on an island. A more important factor linking man to society outside the objects he has created is the faculty of thought and imagination, which separates man from the other living creatures on the planet. (Yaldir)

Imagination is a factor that has contributed to mankind's progress through the generations and, in a way, it has also become a curse for mankind as it can be linked to selfishness. Because imagination exists, man is never satisfied with the material conditions he possesses at any given time. He is always looking for better opportunities or better living conditions, always unable to be content with his present conditions. This quest for utopia is presented in the film through the protagonist's dream. During his first days of isolation on the island, he dreams of a symphony orchestra playing music. He has visions of several musicians playing their violins and saxophones on the beach. This dream is also a symbolic element that has been presented in a minimalist style in the film, proving the existence of a man-made culture in opposition to nature. (Barry) Even in the most helpless situations, man dreams of being part of society and its by-products, art and music. Imagination, then, is another thematic subtext that is presented in the film as a force that makes man think he is entitled to better living conditions, and makes him build a raft to escape from the confines of the island.

The film's artificiality is thus limited to the three symbols mentioned previously: the raft, the bottle and the dream. These are evidence of the film's minimalism, as there is no need for many symbolic images to present the director's ideas, as is the case with many other commercial films. With limited images, the director has succeeded in conveying his message effectively. It is equally important to note that minimalist portrayal is also a style which gives an artform its concreteness, because an excess of literary devices would distort the overall structure and makes the function of focusing on the key takeaways for the viewers into a herculean task.

An important fact to note in this film is the abundance of thematic elements representing nature against the representation of artificiality. The film's natural elements dominate the limited number of artificial objects, evoking the message of nature functioning as a super structure on the limited resources of expression reserved for mankind. This representation of nature as a universal truth that can never be fully apprehended by man, and which escapes any definition we try to give it, has been repeatedly evoked by many ecocritics. (Rangarajan) No matter how hard man tries to go beyond the limits of nature, nature always surrounds us and proves invincible to all the advances of science. In this way, science can be interpreted as man's humble and finite efforts to understand something that is infinite. But in humanity's current Anthropocene era, science has evolved into a quasi-destructive force that exploits the planet's

limited resources, and humanity has been defeated by false illusions of unlimited growth. Humanity has posited itself as an alienated being that is separate from the natural entity, and we have almost forgotten the truth that the destruction of nature will eventually lead to self-destruction, for in essence, we are inseparable parts of a larger unity.

The degrowth movement that began in Europe can be seen as a call for sustainable development in the current political scenario. (Demaria et al.) The film's title is also a reference to current worldwide movements for ecological conservation. The director named his film after one of its characters. *The Red Turtle* is named after a giant sea turtle that appears in the first half of the film. This turtle is the most important symbol of nature presented throughout the film. Although there are many other elements throughout the film that represent nature, such as the storm, the crabs, the island and the rock formations, *The Red Turtle* is the only element that interacts directly with the protagonist. *The Red Turtle* is presented as an obstacle to the protagonist's efforts to escape from the island. (Jenkins) This is a minimalist representation of nature that continues to intervene in the path of destructive human efforts in various ways, such as calamities or disease.

The Renewal of Nature

It's because of *The Red Turtle* that the protagonist is unable to escape the island. Therefore, as the binding force of nature, the turtle is a device to evoke the message that man is born into servitude from birth. In this way, the director has presented his view of the human condition. Unlike other creatures of nature, who develop a natural balance with the forces of nature and are aware of their role in the planet from birth, man is different in this respect, as he has to define his own destiny. He's not sure what he should do when he enters the world, he gives his own meaning to his existence, unlike other beings who know what to do at birth. Humans, on the other hand, define their reality through misery and suffering, in search of peace and happiness. This dilemma of human destiny in relation to the natural environment has been closely examined through the perspective of the Yoruba, and the film offers several parallels with their thoughts. (Gbadegesin) This concept was also presented through two poetic images in the film.

In the first image, the protagonist can be seen watching with curiosity the phenomenon of the birth of baby crabs, which immediately start crawling towards the sea. This can be compared to the protagonist's existence, caught between life's many dilemmas and trying to make sense of everything in solitude. The second event that shows the protagonist's misery is his encounter

with *The Red Turtle* on land. He is unable to perceive *The Red Turtle* as a part of nature to which he also belongs, but can only see it as an adversary that repeatedly tries to defeat him. This is the thought that leads him to apparently kill *The Red Turtle* by turning it upside down so that it can never again crawl towards the sea. It's a minimalist representation of man's destructive powers over nature. (Rangarajan)

Along with this, another salient point that strikes the viewer is the choice of the animal which has been opted by the director to play an integral part in the life of the protagonist. Why did he opt for the turtle instead of any other animal in order to showcase the aspect of nature in this film? It could have also been a crab or a seagull or any other animal or plant for that matter. But there is a characteristic of the turtle which makes it such a suitable metaphor for evoking nature in the film, and which distinguishes it from all other animals. This characteristic is specifically the speed of motion of this animal. Like in the folktales that are commonly narrated to young children for a long time, that of the tortoise and the rabbit, it is a well-known fact that the turtle is a slow animal. It moves at a very slow pace and if not for its protective shell, would have also been an easy target for predators. Likewise, it is a possibility that the turtle serves as a metaphor for nature in this film precisely because of the slowness that is commonly associated with nature. The gradual changes of seasons which happens at a very slow pace which is unobserved in all its detailed glory by humans, the blossoming and withering of flowers and even the simple phenomenon of growth and evolution. Slowness is the key characteristic of all these natural events, in comparison to the rapid pace and impatience that is oft associated with human interventions and scientific progress.

Taking this point into consideration, it becomes a little clearer as to how the choice of this metaphor adds an extra dimension of emotional resonance when the viewer sees the scene where the protagonist apparently kills the turtle. Having arrived at a stage in history where we have reached the tipping points of growth as a society and exploited most resources to the point of scarcity, it becomes a matter of necessity now to slow down the growth cycles, which is highlighted by the degrowth movement mentioned earlier. The imagery of the turtle which constantly keeps breaking the raft that is built by the man is another poetic depiction of how nature reminds mankind of this necessity from time to time through the umpteen calamities, which on close inspection and scrutiny, can be seen to be caused mainly due to the hazardous activities of man on the planet.

Because the film's title is *The Red Turtle*, one might assume that the film would end with the death of the red turtle. But it is at this point in the film that the plot takes a new turn. The power

of minimalist poetics in the film is evoked at this precise moment, when the turtle is transformed into a woman. This symbolic representation can be supported by theories of ecofeminism, which tries to understand why nature is often understood as a mother. From this point onwards, the protagonist begins a new life on the island as a family, as he has a son with the woman. The events that unfold in the second half of the film are in many ways similar to those in the first half. The son undergoes many of the trials encountered by his father, such as falling into the pool at the bottom of the rock formations and having to face the storm towards the end of the film.

One of the film's striking visual representations is an image in which the director has drawn a giant wave frozen in time, and the young man swims to the top of the wave and looks down. When he looks down, he sees his parents waving to him from below. This gives the poetics of the film a certain phantasmic effect, as we know that in reality, waves and time in general don't freeze at any point. But the director has presented this imagery here to underline the importance of this particular stage of life from the young man's point of view. He is struck by the realization that the time has come for him to define his own life and give it his own meaning, so he is aware that he will now have to separate from his parents to begin a new story that has yet to be told. Meanwhile, the wave could also be interpreted as a metaphor for transition and constant change from one form to another. At the end of the film, the viewer sees the young man swimming away from the island with the red turtles. This is yet another example of the film's reinforcement of minimalism. The director no longer needs new characters to present the boy's coming-of-age.

Conclusion

Finally, the director has left all further interpretations up to the viewers as the final shot depicts the boy swimming away into the horizon along with the turtles. It is unclear what lies beyond the horizon and what awaits the young man. The fact that like his father, he is also unsatisfied with the idea of spending the rest of his life on the deserted island, makes the viewer to form assumptions regarding if his quest could also be read as an unconscious urge to reinstate with the human civilization of faraway lands which is marked by a primary neglect of the resources and means of livelihood that nature has already endowed upon him. If this is the case, it implies the distancing of humans in contemporary times from our ecological milieu and core principles of sustainable living into potentially perilous and destructive avenues of uncontrolled scientific progress without humanitarian values at its basic foundational level. But these speculations

amount to proximal probabilities and the open ending which the director has provided for his film could be interpreted as an intentional effort from his side to not impose his subjectivity on the viewers and for maintaining the generally objective tone that prevails throughout the film as to addressing the ontological qualms which have been analysed previously.

Unlike his father, who doubted *The Red Turtle* at first, the boy was born and raised in nature and knows by instinct that nature has presented *The Red Turtle* as his guide and not as a destructive force. This is another alternative interpretation which could be regarded as an optimistic ending, with the hope that future generations will realize the larger unity of which all life on the planet is a part, in accordance with the fundamental principles of deep ecology (Sessions et al.). In any case, the accolades that this work has garnered till date show that it will remain a key point of reference for critical thinkers of various domains in film literature for a long time and it can be concluded that the film was effectively able to convey ecological concerns through its minimalist approach.

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