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Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences

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PHD THESIS

SUMMARY

*Environment and Animal Representations in Animated Films,
or an Ecocritical Analysis of Feature-length Animations*

Produced by Pannónia Studio

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Introduction

The urgent situation of nature conservation is receiving increasing attention in our times, prompting more and more academic disciplines to contribute to the discussion using their own tools. In recent years, the environmental analysis of popular media products has been on the rise, with growing interest in how content aimed at children reflects environmental attitudes and attempts to guide audiences toward greater ecological awareness.

The modern environmental movement began in the 1970s when it also became evident that the success of environmental and nature protection efforts depended on winning the support of the general public. For this reason, increasing emphasis was placed on education and awareness-raising, where the role of the media was undeniable. Historical analysis shows that significant changes were always accompanied by successful environmental communication that reached a wide audience. During socialism, environmental concerns were usually pushed into the background, but gradually gained more space in the media. Today, environmental issues are regularly featured in mainstream media; however, news reports and documentaries often employ apocalyptic narratives that can lead audiences to withdraw or deny ecological problems. This explains the growing focus on the potential of entertaining content for environmental communication. Literature and films can help shift societal values in a more positive direction regarding ecological issues. Although the cute animal characters in animated films may not convey scientifically accurate information about wildlife, they foster emotional sensitivity in audiences and often evoke a level of empathy that leaves a lasting impression. For example, after *Bambi*, many people began to oppose hunting (Stanton, 2021, p.81).

My thesis explores the ecocritical readings of feature-length Hungarian animated films produced by Pannónia Studio, focusing on the representation of nature and animals, and the relationship between humans and the environment. The films selected for analysis were released between 1973 and 1989 – a period of particular importance both in the history of environmental movements and in Hungarian animation. I address a significant gap in environmental humanities

research, particularly in the Hungarian context, where the intersection of animation and ecological narratives has been scarcely explored. By systematically reviewing the literature on environmental humanities and ecocritical approaches to animation, my work offers a pioneering analysis of Hungarian animated films through an ecological lens. This perspective is particularly useful for environmental education since earlier studies show that animated films with ecological themes can be a powerful tool for teaching children about the environment. Therefore, my topic has both academic and social value and addresses a neglected area. Ecocriticism and animal studies have only recently gained popularity in the fields of communication, media studies, and film theory. As a result, these areas are still undergoing a transformation in terms of literature and methodology, and terminological inconsistencies remain. My research aims to fill these gaps by expanding the available literature in Hungarian and proposing a more tangible set of analytical criteria that may serve as a foundation for similar studies in the future.

Structurally, the thesis begins with a literature review, divided into five main sections discussing animated films within the context of eco-media and environmental efforts. This is followed by a methodological chapter, which presents the dedicated coding tools, and then the analysis of the films. First, I focus on broader ecocritical dimensions found in the cartoons, then analyse them in the context of animal studies, and finally, I identify the Hungarian enviro-toons, complemented by a period-specific reception study.

Brief summary of the literature

Considering that this is an interdisciplinary research area – one that requires familiarity with several different fields to understand and apply the conceptual frame properly – a comprehensive literature review forms a major part of my thesis, providing a theoretical framework for my research. Since the focus of my research is on older animated films, the literature review includes an outline of the significant historical context. However, I made a point of incorporating current articles and research when discussing ecocriticism and animal studies to reflect the field's current state.

I divided the theoretical framework into five major sections. The first provides a historical overview of the development of environmentalism, with special attention to Hungary during the 1970s and 1980s. I believe this historical understanding is essential for contextualizing the film analysis. The history of environmentalism and animal welfare is deeply intertwined, reflecting changes in societal values, scientific understanding, and ethical considerations. Today, it is clear

that tackling the ecological catastrophe requires global cooperation – there are no simple solutions, and interdisciplinary approaches and institutional collaboration are necessary. As Schulz et al. (2014) emphasize, all media platforms must be used to communicate credible, clear, and consistent information. The environmental overview of my thesis shows that art and media products can play a crucial role in raising awareness, sensitising the public to environmental issues and influencing legislation. Environmental concerns are not only the domain of news and science journals; they have long engaged writers, philosophers, and visual artists, who have used moving narratives to document the pressing issues of their times and advocate for the values of nature. The overview also reveals that three main types of narrative have consistently captured public interest and effectively communicated environmental issues. The first type centres around the suffering or extinction of charismatic animals caused by human negligence. The second is the apocalyptic narrative, rooted in biblical and mythological traditions, its ecocritical significance is highlighted by Garrard (2012), Hódosy (2018), and even by Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Disaster stories are also often presented in the media, both in news reports and feature films. The third draws on pastoral poetry and evokes a nostalgic yearning for the beauty of an idealized nature, often tied to escapism from the chaos of urban life.

Some key milestones in Hungarian environmental history from the 1970s and 1980s include: the beginning of the “unfolding phase” of Hungarian conservation in 1971; the founding of the first national park in 1972; a new environmental law in 1976 that made environmental protection mandatory for citizens; and in the 1980s various environmental organisations started to be established (Rakonczay, 2002). Although these efforts took different forms than today, nature and environmental themes were already present in Hungary during the production period of the animated films I analyse, and were gaining increasing attention in education. International environmental movements also emerged during this time and may have influenced the messages in these cartoons.

Following this, my review turns to philosophical reflections on the human–nature relationship, drawing from the broad field of environmental humanities. Emerging in the early 21st century, this interdisciplinary field explores the relationship between the environment, society, and human activity. In short, environmental humanities is an umbrella term for fields of the humanities and social sciences concerned with environmental issues. These interdisciplinary inquiries seek to bridge the gap between human and environmental sciences and provide emotionally resonant, accessible narratives about our complex relationship with nature (Emmett & Nye, 2017, pp. 3-5).

Within this framework, I explore a range of ecophilosophical perspectives, which later serve as analytical categories in my research. I rely on Garrard (2012), Hódosy (2018), and Kiss (2018) to outline three main schools of thought: ecocentric or deep ecology perspectives, environmentally conscious or pastoral views, and exploitative, cornucopian approaches to nature.

This section also discusses the relationship between animals and humans in the context of animal studies, with an emphasis on its ecocritical implications. Animal studies focus primarily on the individual and species-specific aspects of the animal world, exploring its cultural, political and ethical dimensions (Middelhoff & Schönbeck, 2019, pp. 14-16). Literature suggests that animals can serve as charismatic ambassadors for environmental causes, as emotional bonds between humans and animals often translate into broader concern for the environment (Echeverri et al., 2018, p. 50).

The theoretical part of my thesis places a strong emphasis on the relationship between environmentalism and the media since animation belongs to the media domain. Public awareness and education – essential components of environmental efforts – are strongly influenced by media, which plays a key role in shaping perceptions of nature. Ecomedia studies, closely related to ecocriticism, have become increasingly prominent within environmental humanities. In addition to traditional media like news and documentaries, academic attention is growing toward the ecological analysis of popular media (Seeling, 2019; Hódosy, 2018).

After presenting the broader theoretical context, I provide a comprehensive overview of ecocriticism and ecocinema, including definitions, historical development, and current debates. Ecocriticism is distinguished from other critical cultural studies primarily by its subject matter. It asks questions about human relationships with nature and animals, how nature is represented in texts, and whether the values presented align with ecological principles (Glottfelty, 1996, pp. xviii–xix). Based on Garrard (2012), I outline seven key tropes of ecocriticism – pollution, pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and the Earth – some of which also serve as analytical categories in my research.

With the rise of ecocinema studies and the increasing popularity of animated films, growing attention is paid to their ecological analysis – particularly those aimed at children. These family-oriented animations can be powerful tools to engage young audiences in environmental thinking (Starosielski, 2011; Heise, 2014). Animated films typically depict the human–nature relationship in three ways. A dichotomous model, where humans and nature are portrayed as

leading separate lifestyles. The separation, often creating conflict between the two, juxtaposes nature and the world of industry/technology. Sometimes in a broad sense, other times specifically in terms of the relationship between animals and humans, with solutions favouring continued separation. The second type promotes coexistence and interdependence, where humans are seen as part of nature, requiring mutual adaptation. The third is the posthumanist perspective, which sometimes questions the legitimacy of human dominance (Starosielski, 2011; Murray-Heumann, 2011; Gerencsér, 2020).

In discussing the ecological analysis of animated films, I also introduce the term *enviro-toons*, a term I borrowed from Murray and Heumann (2011), to describe animated films where environmental themes are central to the narrative. In analysing the literature on animated films, it also emerged that pastoral tropes are frequently depicted, and environmental messages are often conveyed through the animal world. Like popular cinema in general, popular animated films tend to reflect widely accepted social norms.

The final section of the literature review provides a detailed overview of Hungarian animation history, focusing on the institutional development of Pannónia Film Studio and its main periods. Over its 110-year history, the Hungarian animation industry has faced many changes and challenges, but at one time, Pannónia was ranked among the top five animation studios in the world – alongside Disney, Hanna-Barbera, Toei, and Soyuzmultfilm (Margitházi, 2002). Although the films I analyse were produced between 1973 and 1989, many remain widely known and loved today. Various periodisation of Hungarian animation exists; in my work, I follow Varga's (2016) origin-based classification and Dizseri's production-type grouping, with particular emphasis on the Pannónia era. Eastern European animated film production, including Hungarian animation, was strongly influenced by cultural policy factors during the Soviet period, as it was constantly subject to ideological control, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. Still, compared to live-action films, animations enjoyed relatively greater creative freedom, as they were not taken as seriously by censors (Varga, 2016, pp. 66–70).

Methodological Overview

The central research question of the thesis:

Q: How are nature and the animal world represented in the feature-length animated films produced by Pannónia Film Studio?

To answer this central question, I have broken it down into the following six sub-questions:

Q1: In what forms and with what frequency does the destruction or pollution of the natural world appear?

Q2: To what extent is there a call for environmental activism?

Q3: What patterns emerge in the human–nature relationship depending on the depicted habitats?

Q4: What character profiles emerge based on their relationship with nature?

Q5: How do the animated films address issues related to animal welfare?

Q6: What types and characteristics of animal representations are found in the films?

My research methods involve various qualitative techniques, with a significant focus on ecocriticism studies and narrative analysis. A distinctive element of the methodological approach is the creation and implementation of dedicated coding tools, to help identify and organise the ecological themes in the films. The coding tools developed are not only an internal analytical tool, but also propose a potentially transferable methodological framework that could provide a rigorous and adaptable tool for other researchers interested in the intersection between artistic representations and environmental discourses.

Finally, I developed four coding sheets:

- A **thematic coding sheet**, which marks the presence of 12 ecological themes;
- An **environment-type coding sheet**, where I categorised environmental settings along the urban–rural–wilderness scale;
- A **character ecophilosophical standpoint coding sheet**, which groups characters into exploitative, environmentalist, ecocentric, or neutral categories and also indicates shifts in their perspectives under the label of “transitions”;
- The fourth coding sheet presents a **typology of animal characters**, indicating their level of anthropomorphism, role in the narrative, and moral representation.

These coding sheets form the foundation for organising and unfolding the qualitative analysis.

Main results of the research

In the ecocritical reading of animated films – and in the depiction of the human–nature relationship – five main dimensions emerge based on the coding sheets: the destruction of nature, activism, the human–nature relationship as reflected through environment types,

character profiles based on ecophilosophical perspectives, and animal welfare and representation. After discussing these five main categories, I identify which of Pannónia Studio's feature-length animated films can be classified as enviro-toons.

The destruction of nature appears in only a few films, where it is present, it is primarily shown through visual means. Common depictions include deforestation, water and air pollution, and the presence of garbage. The films rarely offer direct criticism of these destructive behaviours; rather, they portray them, often framing them through the lens of animal suffering. While these events are not always accompanied by critical commentary at the narrative level, they are presented visually with dark, sombre, and emotionally heavy imagery – techniques typically used in Pannónia animations to signal negative emotional tones.

The theme of activism appears explicitly in only two films. One includes a call to protect the forest, while the other promotes the protection of animals and fair treatment of them. These messages are delivered in strong, ecocentric terms, such as declaring that life is not worth living without nature, or that human survival is at risk if the environment is not protected.

I classified the film settings into three distinct types of environments: urban, rural, and wilderness, with castles being categorized under the urban umbrella. Rural and wilderness areas sometimes overlap, these instances were coded under both types. My analysis focused not only how these landscapes were portrayed, but also on the values and narratives associated with them, and how realistically they were depicted. This classification scheme also helped reveal patterns in the human–nature relationship and assess how close characters are to nature. Most films feature more than one environment type, and the representations are diverse. Urban and castle settings frequently attract criticism; their residents are often shown as materialistic and disconnected from nature. The countryside serves as a transitional space between the bustling city and untamed wilderness and is often associated with idyllic pastoral tropes, where residents seem to live more harmoniously with their environment. The wilderness appears in two forms: the tamed wilderness, which overlaps with rural areas, and the dangerous wilderness, often serving as the setting for character-building adventures. The contrast between these settings is primarily moral, with the nature connection being secondary. Overall, Pannónia's feature-length animations tend to depict a division between humans and nature, as well as between urban and rural lifestyles, rather than mutual adaptation and coexistence, despite some characters exemplifying the potential for coexistence.

The human–nature relationship in these films often reflects a pastoral worldview, suggesting that true happiness derives from a simple, nature-connected existence wherein individuals care for their environment and regard material wealth with indifference. Protagonists who venture from their rural origins into the wider world often express a deep yearning to return, viewing their homelands as sanctuaries from the perils of urban life and industrialization. However, it's important to highlight the problematic nature of the pastoral trope: it often distorts reality by promoting landscapes that are not under actual environmental threat and suggests that rural inhabitants lead inherently sustainable lives and love animals – something not supported by academic literature, which often suggests otherwise.

In terms of character profiles based on ecophilosophical perspectives, it can be observed that the analysed films link behaviour toward nature to the moral affiliation of the characters. Villains tend to be hostile toward the natural world, while heroes and their allies are portrayed as neutral or friendly toward it. However, their level of environmental commitment varies from character to character, with female characters being more ecocentric on average. Consequently, these films canonise environmentally friendly behaviour as a model to follow. In Pannónia animations, ecophilosophical standpoints (with a few exceptions) are often conveyed through how characters treat animals and engage with animal welfare. According to the cartoons, several factors influence the characters' environmental identities and potential transformations, including institutions, community, knowledge about nature, and cohabitation with the natural world. Interestingly, characters who begin as ecocentric never shift away from that stance - they do not become less environmentally friendly.

Animals as cultural constructs – that is, the depiction of animals and the harms they suffer in our cultural products – constitute a significant part of ecocritical readings, but more specifically, they fall within the domain of animal studies. In my thesis, I, therefore, address these topics under the label of animal studies, dividing them into two subchapters. The first focuses on animal welfare, while the second examines their representation based on the previously mentioned coding sheet for animal characters.

In the feature-length animated films of Pannónia Studio, there are frequent references to issues concerning animal welfare. However, most of these do not necessarily stem from an environmentalist perspective; rather, they serve to reinforce the moral alignment of the characters and reflect the traditional animation trope of the animal sidekick, popularized especially by Disney. Nonetheless, it can be generally stated that these films condemn the

mistreatment of animals, an attitude also reflected in the aforementioned character profiles. The harms depicted mainly involve the hunting of animals and the treatment of pets.

Regarding the depiction of animals, Pannónia's animated films are highly diverse – the use of animal characters varies from story to story and from creator to creator. Ultimately, four main types of animal representation can be identified in the studio's films:

- Animals as accessories or decorative elements;
- Animals as allegories;
- Animals whose anthropomorphisation strips them of their animal nature;
- Animals with a “balanced”, more animal-centric anthropomorphisation, in which they retain their animality.

These four categories are not mutually exclusive; within a single film, different animals may fall into different representational groups depending on their narrative role.

Of the 23 feature-length animated films analysed from Pannónia Studio, five can ultimately be classified as enviro-toons: *Hugó, a víziló* (*Hugó, the Hippo*, 1975, dir. William Feigenbaum, József Gémes), *Vuk* (*The Little Fox*, 1981, dir. Attila Dargay), *Vízipók-csodapók* (*Water-Spider, Wonder-Spider*, 1982, dir. József Hauli, Szabolcs Szabó, Csaba Szombati Szabó), *Gréti...!* (*egy kutya feljegyzései*) (*Gréti...! (Diary of a Dog)*, 1986, dir. József Nepp), and *Az erdő kapitánya* (*The Captain of the Forest*, 1988, dir. Attila Dargay). All five films were primarily created for a child audience. However, each focuses on different themes and employs different types of stories to evoke empathy from viewers. Among the five enviro-toons, *The Captain of the Forest*, as its title suggests, focuses mainly on forest protection, while the other four centre on animals, with an emphasis on education and animal welfare.

I also conducted a brief reception study of these five films, examining press materials – primarily reviews and critiques – using the *Arcanum* database. Based on the results, it can be concluded that *The Little Fox* received the most media coverage, and the articles about it most frequently highlight its environmental themes. Nevertheless, journalists rarely placed a strong emphasis on environmental issues in the reviews.

On a final note, my research revealed the pastoral narrative as the main ecological paradigm in the analysed animation films. The pastoral narrative presents an idealized view of nature, while also often criticizing industrial progress. The films also frequently use animal characters to illustrate and dramatise ecological issues. Animal representations are also quite diverse, from

background animals to protagonists. Interestingly, despite being rooted in a national context, these portrayals mirror international trends in ecological storytelling featured in children's media. Unlike Disney productions, where common themes and categories are easily recognisable, Hungarian animation films present a more diverse research corpus, because the films are characterised more by their director's individual vision than by the institutional features of the studio.

In summary, my thesis makes a significant contribution to the field of environmental humanities by applying ecocritical theory to a hitherto unexplored corpus from this perspective, namely Hungarian animation feature films. It not only bridges a gap in the literature but also provides new insights into how animated media can spark ecological conversations and influence cultural perceptions.

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