

## Pom Poko

No other film has pushed me so gently into crying so hard. The first writing I ever did about film was an essay about 'Takahata as auteur' [*auteur*: fancy word for director] in a high school class. I contrasted Grave of the Fireflies with Pom Poko. Since then I have seen The Tale of Princess Kaguya a few times as well. Of all directors I know, Takahata impresses me the most. Of all his films, Pom Poko impresses me the most.

The elder Tanuki (Raccoons in the English sub and dub, but actually a beautiful species of canid, westerners might picture a cross between raccoon and coyote) are the three venerated individuals meant to lead the focal tribe to victory, which in this case solely means survival. The movie proceeds thusly. The joyful parade of the buddha delivers the warlike elder to the peace of the afterlife, after he dies giving his energy to the last (or, last hopeful at least) attempt at saving the forest entirely. The second elder leads a tragic but celebratory parade of the fatalistically religious non-transforming raccoons who perish in a suicidal journey into the water. Finally, the third, and only-slightly-successful trick is performed with the aid of the last elder who is younger and more rational than his two peers.

These three forked paths pierce directly into the consciousness. Takahata refuses to leave any out for our guilt: we all share humanity's guilt pushing nature further and further into the margins. No possible rebuttal survives the cruel and unthinking push of human expanse. Aggression, faith, wisdom: nothing can save the tanuki from humanity. Takahata animates nature uniquely. He gives it space and time through the slowest portions of the movie: from the tanuki foraging, to the tanuki standing and watching as their world changes around them in a way which they cannot hope to survive. It is always nature which lingers on the screen. Even when human creation takes up many minutes, it is simultaneously frantic and flat compared to the deep and lovely progress of natural life taking its course.

All of Takahata's films offer sublime contrasts – buddha's joyful, musical, celebratory parade also delivers Kaguya from Earth (after stealing her memory), just as it does the harshest and most warlike (though perhaps the most hopeful in this same way) tanuki elder. The afterlife is not horrible or scary so much as it is sad, or perhaps, so much as it is worth considering. In Pom Poko we see that, if anything about death is horrifying, it is our ushering of ways of life, of whole existences, into extinction that is horrifying. The tanuki are not selfish when they make their final illusion under the guidance of the third elder: the area as it was before development. Their illusion and hope include village people as well, living alongside plants and animals daily – drawing sustenance from the Earth as it exists around them. These people are similarly annihilated. These ways of life, these human mode of joy and experience, are similarly annihilated.

Pom Poko should be watched in every elementary school, middle school, and high school across America and beyond its borders. No film maker has accomplished the same feat: in humanizing without fully or necessarily anthropomorphizing nature. What Takahata has accomplished, in terms of demonstrating just what we stand to lose should our selfishness continue, pierces as though we stand ourselves in front of an ancient temple as it crumbles; we know that we failed to save it, failed to even fight for it, even as we can picture our grandparents weep at its destruction.