

Mononoke Aesthetics in the Lights of Laozi and Peirce

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ABSTRACT: In the digital age, redefining and aesthetically appraising the spiritual substance of non-human entities is crucial, as traditional folklore's immaterial beings like ghosts are not fully integrated into digital information products. But the enduring popularity of ghost monsters in global media culture, especially *mononoke* or *yōkai* in Japan, makes us rethink their immaterial presence alongside advancements in human technology and AI. A notable case is the TV series *Mononoke* (2006-07), which has spawned adaptations across various media in Japan and recently begun a film trilogy (2024-). Here, we explore the philosophical underpinnings of the series, focusing on the exorcism performed by the protagonist ('medicine seller') via three keywords: 'form', 'truth', and 'reason'. By doing so, we link the *mononoke* nature to two philosophical traditions: historical Daoism and modern pragmatism. The first analysis draws on Laozi's concept of 'container' (*qi*), or the form of *Dao*. Secondly, we deploy the pragmatist C.S. Peirce's three normative steps of logic, ethics, and aesthetics. Overall, we argue that the *mononoke*'s immaterial nature and the haunting of humans are rooted in an elaborately aesthetic interplay of form, truth, and reason.

KEY-WORDS: Ghost Monsters; *Yōkai*; Japanese Animation; Laozi; Peirce.

RESUMO: Na era digital, redefinir e valorizar esteticamente a substância espiritual de entidades não humanas é fundamental, pois seres materiais do folclore tradicional – como fantasmas – ainda não se encontram plenamente integrados na informação digital. No entanto, a popularidade duradoura de criaturas fantasmagóricas na cultura midiática global, especialmente *mononoke* ou *yōkai* no Japão, nos instiga a repensar sua presença imaterial em paralelo ao avanço da tecnologia humana e da inteligência artificial. Um caso emblemático é a série de TV *Mononoke* (2006-07), que gerou adaptações em diferentes mídias no Japão e, recentemente, inaugurou uma trilogia cinematográfica (2024-). Neste artigo, investigamos os fundamentos filosóficos da série, com ênfase no exorcismo realizado pelo protagonista (o “vendedor de remédios”), considerando três conceitos centrais: “forma”, “verdade” e “razão”. Ao fazê-lo, vinculamos a natureza do *mononoke* a duas tradições filosóficas: o Daoísmo histórico e o pragmatismo moderno. A primeira análise pauta-se na concepção de Laozi sobre “recipiente” (*qi*), ou a forma do *Dao*. Em seguida, recorreremos à estrutura pragmatista de C. S. Peirce, com especial atenção a seus três passos normativos: lógica, ética e estética. Concluímos que a natureza imaterial do *mononoke* – bem como sua capacidade de assombrar os seres humanos – está ancorada em um elaborado diálogo estético entre forma, verdade e razão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Monstros Fantasmagóricos; *Yōkai*; *Mangá*; Animação Japonesa; Laozi; Peirce.

Introduction

It is important in the burgeoning digital age that we redefine and aesthetically appraise the so-called ‘spiritual substance’ in what is *not* human. This is because it is mind-boggling to understand what is *not* subsumed under digital information products, for example, the κάλλος (good or beauty that encompasses ethics and aesthetics) of the immaterial.¹ On the one hand, one can represent material beings (or things related to matter) in many digital formats, ranging between TV and extended reality (ER, including AR, VR, and MR). On the other, immaterial beings (and their affects) in traditional folklore, such as spirits and ghosts, appear not fully incorporated into information technology. Even if they are represented, they are not virtually real but mere fictions. However, the abiding popularity of ghost monsters in media culture, especially monsters called *mononoke* or *yōkai* in Japanese folktales,² would demand that we rethink their immaterial presence along with the development of human technology and artificial intelligence *and* along with the judgement of truth and reality about fictions.

On our view, there is a commercially successful and philosophically interesting case in Japan: a TV series *Mononoke* (2006–07, directed by Kenji Nakamura). This animation from Japanese horror folktales has garnered so much popularity that it has been adapted to different media in Japan – manga books (since 2008), novels (2022; 2024), theatrical plays (2023; 2024) – and recently begun an animation film trilogy (since 2024). Whilst there might be more adaptations and

¹ What is ‘good/beautiful’ (*kalon*) in ‘all the forms of divine possession’ and the *kallos* are defined in Plato’s dialogues, e.g. the *Phaedrus*, 249D–250D (trans. Horan). For this Platonist suggestion, we are grateful to the first reviewer of the journal.

² To name a few, Mizuki’s *Gegege no Kitarō* (1960) and Ghibli’s *Princess Mononoke* (1997) may pop up in one’s mind as to internationally well-received *yōkai/mononoke* folklore creatures in modern Japan. In relation to them, the Chinese classic, *the Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (山海經 *Shanhaijing*) portrays a wide array of curious folklore creatures in ancient times. See Strassberg, 2002. For Japanese *yōkai* folkloristics, see Foster, 2021.

spin-offs of *Mononoke* in future, we will zoom in on the original TV animation series of six stories (2006; 2007).

In this article, we will argue that there is a philosophical reason for the popular horror animation and shine a new light on the plot of folk demons or ghost monsters, *mononoke*. These immaterial beings are explicable in three keywords, whereby the protagonist, a ‘medicine seller’, exorcises *mononoke* demons. The three keywords are:

- (1) Form (形 *katachi*)
- (2) Truth (真 *makoto*)
- (3) Reason (理 *kotowari*)

In the process of identification of 1 to 3, each immaterial *mononoke* or *yokai* (Japanese: ‘zashikiwarashi’, ‘umibōzu’, ‘nopperabō’, ‘nue’, and ‘bakeneko’) rests in peace at the end of each folktale. We take it that this process is analytically philosophical, tuning sonorously in the logic and affect of *mononoke* to describe the experience of its emotions. To this end, the article is broken down into three sections. Stated differently, we will reinforce the identification process in the following two contrastive perspectives: (§1) historical Daoism and (§2) modern pragmatism. In particular, §1 defends the form as ‘container’ or ‘instrument’ (器 *qi*) and the truth and reason *along* the ‘way’ (道 *dao*) in the context of the *Laozi* (*Daodejing*). Then, §2 further philosophises the three keywords through the three normative steps enunciated by the pragmatist C.S. Peirce (1839–1914):³ (i) logic, (ii) ethics, and (iii) aesthetics.

Hypothetically, on our rendering, an argument about the *mononoke* in Peirce’s three steps can be regimented as follows:

³ Peirce is also a semiotician. Whilst we consider that his theory of signs cannot be conceived without his studies of logic, it can be seen that technological media science is enriched by his semiotics. See Chudy and Müller, 2024.

Mononoke argument

- P1. There is a form of *mononoke* (物怪/妖怪 = 妖 *ayakashi* + demonic 怪 *ke*).
[logic]
- P2. If there is a *mononoke* form, then there is truth about its demonic emotions. [ethics]
- P3. If there is truth about the *mononoke's* emotions, then there is good reason for its ugliness. [aesthetics]
- C. Therefore, there is good reason for the *mononoke's* ugliness.

We *analyse* this argument as valid and sound by parsing each of the three premises: (P1) logical foundation for the form of immaterial monstrosity, (P2) ethical judgement about the morally good or wrong acts in discoursing the truth or falsity, and (P3) aesthetic judgement about beauty or ugliness.

1. Daoist Foundations for the Mononoke Form

Through the six stories of *Mononoke* (2006–07, composed of fifteen episodes), one thing in common is the definition of *mononoke* as demonic ghosts or monsters. Each *mononoke* is a certain combination of (i) materiality and (ii) spirituality, or (i) omnipresent sensible monsters (妖 *ayakashi*) and (ii) evil spirits or negative emotions of humans, dead or alive (情念 *jyōnen*). Both words ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ denote something unique to a collection of *mononoke* in folkloristics, monster studies, and aesthetics. In particular, what is aesthetically spiritual is difficult to define, whereas it differs at least from the meanings in two philosophical approaches: German idealism and Foucault.⁴

First, the *mononoke* spirituality differs from a German idealist reading, as represented by Hegel in the nineteenth century. For Hegel,

⁴ Tsaiyi Wu (2020, pp. 524–25) contrasts the two approaches, i.e. German idealism and Foucault, and sides with the latter in the light of human-centred epistemological ‘model’ or ‘form’ (象 *xiang*) in ancient Chinese texts including the *Laozi*. Whereas we argue that neither is the case for *mononoke* in the non-human and beyond-human nature.

the word ‘spirituality’ is tantamount to ‘creation’ or something productive within the purview of the human mind. According to him, ‘even a useless notion that enters a [hu]man’s head is higher than any product of nature, because, in such a notion, spirituality and freedom are always present’ (Hegel, 1975, p. 2, modification added). Second, the *mononoke* spirituality also differs from a Foucauldian reading, where spirituality is taken to be a self-transformation in virtue of the human mind. According to Foucault himself, ‘we could call “spirituality” the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on [them]self in order to have access to the truth’ (Foucault, 2005, p. 15, modification added). On the contrary, we consider that neither of the meanings suffices the epistemic and aesthetic scopes of *mononoke*. That is, the *mononoke* spirituality is free from the constrictive human knowledge, be it for the sake of their own creation or their own practice and cultivation. This is because the moral beauty and ugliness of *mononoke* are appreciated not from the (Hegelian and Foucauldian) *human* perspective but on the *mononoke*’s own terms, which we humans try to understand.

In the following sub-sections, along with a brief introduction to the *Mononoke* series, we show the *mononoke* form as the combination of materiality and spirituality in all six stories. On this basis, the second sub-section confirms the *mononoke* ‘form’ in the ancient Asian context of *Laozi*, with a chief emphasis on the meanings of ‘container’ or ‘instrument’ (器 *qi*).

1. Materiality and Spirituality in the Mononoke Form

As mentioned above, (i) materiality and (ii) spirituality in the *Mononoke* can be paraphrased to (i) omnipresent sensible monsters, as defined 妖 (Japanese: *ayakashi*), and (ii) evil spirits or negative emotions of humans, be they dead or alive, which can be called 怪 (*ke*). In the combination of the two Chinese characters, 妖怪 (Japanese: *yōkai*)

literally indicates ghost monsters in East Asian folktales (in China, Korea, Japan, etc.). The word ‘妖怪’ can be paraphrased as ‘物怪’ (*mononoke*), which is the title of the animation series. Put differently, the conjunction of (i) 妖 (*ayakashi*) and (ii) 怪 (*ke*) constitutes each 物怪 (*mononoke*). To that effect, these Chinese characters are explained in *Mononoke* (2007, episode 4, ‘umibōzu’):

- i. *Ayakashi* (妖) are ghosts existing everywhere in this world, sensible to humans, whereas their *raison d'être* is beyond human understanding;
- ii. *Ke* (怪) refers to ‘ill’ (病 *yamai*), or dark, negative, and evil emotions (情念 *kyōnen*) in humans, dead or still alive;
- iii. *Mono* in *mononoke* refers to the ghosts’ malevolent or ill-disposed godly nature (荒ぶる神 *araburu-kami*);
- iv. *Mononoke* are ill-disposed gods (魔羅の鬼 *maro-no-oni*) as *mono* that unites *ayakashi* and *ke* (妖 + 怪);
- v. *Mononoke*, therefore, uninhibitedly haunt human beings with ‘grudge, sadness, and hatred’ (恨み *urami*; 悲しみ *kanashimi*; 憎しみ *nikushimi*), and kill them at times;
- vi. *Mononoke*, however, can rest in peace through the protagonist’s exorcising sword (退魔の剣 *tai-ma-no-ken*) that listens to their form, truth, and reason.

Whilst the sixth point on the three keywords ‘form, truth, and reason’ shall be discussed later on, here it is important to understand the fourth point on the conjunction of *ayakashi* and *ke* in each *mononoke*. In the narratives of the *Mononoke* characters, it can be seen that the *mononoke* materiality corresponds roughly to the sensible *ayakashi*, and the *mononoke* spirituality does to the ill-oriented emotional *ke*. To some extent, *mononoke* ghosts are so real that they can kill people who treat them badly. Both components of the *ayakashi* and *ke* are at first incomprehensible for ordinary people, although they are dramatically brought to light in the end.

Overall, each of the six stories about *mononoke* (物怪) substantially differs from one another in terms of their *ayakashi* (妖) and

ke (怪).⁵ For clarification, therefore, we lay out a variety of *mononoke* and their properties in the following (Table 1).⁶

Episodes	<i>mononoke</i>	<i>ayakashi</i>	<i>ke</i> (dark emotions)	Properties
1-3 (2006)	化猫 ‘bakeneko’ [ghost cat]	A kitten fostered and adored by a woman, Tamao	Misery of Tamao, kidnapped, prisoned, raped, and killed in a cage hidden in a palace	<i>Yōkai</i> in zoology
1-2 (2007)	座敷童子 ‘zashikiwarashi’ [parlour child]	Daruma dolls (aborted babies)	Grief of many babies, killed at birth in an ex-brothel	<i>Yōkai</i> in physics
3-5 (2007)	海坊主 ‘umibōzu’ [sea monster]	A sea giant (umizatō) in the dragon’s triangle	False remorse of an old monk, Genkei, about his sister, sacrificed in his stead	<i>Yōkai</i> in geology
6-7 (2007)	のっぺらぼう ‘nopperabō’ [featureless face]	A fictional man with many masks, within a woman, Ochō	Self-reproach of Ochō, whose dreams were distorted by her mother	<i>Yōkai</i> in psychology

⁵ Regarding the approximate time settings, the first five stories fit in the Japanese early modern Edo period (1603–1868). On the contrary, the last story of the ‘bakeneko’ (unrelated to the first ‘bakeneko’ kitten) is modern, set in the late 1920s or the beginning of the Shōwa era in Japan, featuring ‘Modern Girls’ (from the prior Taishō era) and the opening of the first metro line.

⁶ Properties in the far right column are deliberated based on the distinction by Inoue Enryō (1858–1919). In his famous lectures on *yōkai* studies (*yōkaigaku*), Inoue distinguished ‘physical’ and ‘psychological’ *yōkai* (物理的/心理的妖怪) in a bid to expunge popular and unscientific superstitions that gave rise to the existence of *yōkai* (2001 [1891]). On our view, the *ayakashi* in each *mononoke* concerns their psychological problems or evil affects in Inoue’s definitions, whereas each physical aspect differs from one another. By contrast, the philosopher and educator Inoue’s methodology was not in accord with the father of Japanese folklore, Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962). The latter’s approach to archiving *yōkai* beliefs was to consider closely the rapport between human beings and *yōkai* in bygone days and explain why they were ambiguously inseparable. See Foster, 2021, pp. 13–14.

8-9 (2007)	鶴 ‘nue’ [monkey-raccoon-tiger-snake]	A fragrant wood (kōboku) called ‘Tōdai-ji’ (Ranjatai)	Deadly enthusiasm of fiancé-candidates for winning the love of Princess Ruri	<i>Yōkai</i> in botany
10-12 (2007)	化猫 ‘bakeneko’ [ghost cat, in the late 1920s]	Someone’s cat on a railway	Vengeful thought of a journalist Setsuko, betrayed by her boss	<i>Yōkai</i> in zoology

Table 1: *Mononoke* Synopsis

As above, whilst recounting all the stories calls for another paper, we can here emphasise that each *mononoke* is a supernaturally physical (sensible) and ill-disposed psychological conjunction between the *ayakashi* and the *ke*. These properties can be largely accounted for as Japanese early modern or pre-modern folkloristic phenomena (Inoue, 2001), even though the *Mononoke* series is a modern fiction. In the next section, we will consider how the *Laozi* text possibly upholds the philosophical significance of *mononoke*.

2. The Laozi Signification of ‘Form’: 形 (Xing) as 器 (Qi)

It is philosophically significant to support the meanings of *mononoke* as sourced in ancient Asian texts, such as the *Laozi*. In the *Laozi* context, we will see the first term, ‘form’ (形), amongst the three keywords, whereby the protagonist ‘medicine seller’ exorcises demonic ill-disposed *mononoke* (Japanese expressions in italics):

- (1) Form (形 *katachi*)
- (2) Truth (真 *makoto*)
- (3) Reason (理 *kotowari*)

In the *Laozi*, the ‘container’, ‘instrument’, or ‘capacity’ (器, Chinese: *qi*) is most relevant to grasping the first keyword, ‘form’ (形, Chinese: *xing*). In the received version of the original Chinese text, the

character ‘器’ appears twelve times.⁷

Below are some of the most relevant passages on the ‘qi [器]’ (*Laozi*, English translation from Ryden, 2008, modification added), along with two lines including the ‘xing [形]’ (chs. 41, 51):

Ch. 11: Moulding clay into containers [pots];
in beingless lies the container’s usefulness.
[埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用]⁸

Ch. 28: Perennial life force now sufficing brings you back to lumpen wood.
Lumpen wood is cut up and made into containers [cups];
[常德乃足，復歸於樸。樸散則為器]⁹

Ch. 31: Now as for weapons, they are instruments [containers] of bad luck;
There are those who hate such things;
Therefore, *those who have the Way do not dwell on them* [emphasis added].
[...] Weapons are instruments of bad luck;
They are not the instruments of a gentleman.
[夫佳兵者，不祥之器，物或惡之，故有道者不處...兵者不祥之器，非君子之器]¹⁰

Ch. 41: The great square has no corners;
The great completion [container] is not completed;
The great note has no voice;
The great symbol has no shape.
The Way is great¹¹ yet nameless.
The Way alone is good at inaugurating and then *completing things*.
[emphasis added]

⁷ See *Laozi*, chs. 11 (twice), 28, 29, 31 (thrice), 36, 41, 57, 67, 80: the character ‘器’ appears twelve times. In addition to the received Wang Bi version in square brackets (Alquiros, 2018), we duly consider differences in the Mawangdui (馬王堆) and Guodian (郭店) versions in footnotes, regardless of more versions.

⁸ Mawangdui: 然埴為器 當其無 有埴器 □□ [here, □ indicates non-readable characters].

⁹ Mawangdui: 恆德不貸 復歸於無極 樸散則為器.

¹⁰ Mawangdui: 夫兵者 不祥之器 □ 物或惡之 故有欲者弗居 [...] 故兵者非君子之器也 □□ 不祥之器也 [some parts are damaged].

¹¹ Here, we follow the Mawangdui version of ‘great’ or ‘praised’ (褒), instead of the received one, ‘hidden’.

[大方無隅; 大器晚成; 大音希聲; 大象無形; 道隱無名. 夫唯道, 善貸且成]¹²

Ch. 51: The Way generates them and the life force nourishes them;
Material embodies them and the final shape [container]¹³ completes them.

[道生之, 德畜之, 物形之, 勢成之]¹⁴

Ch. 80: Let the state be small and people few
Let weapons [containers/instruments] of platoons and brigades be unused;

Let the people respect death and renounce travel.

[小國寡民; 使有什伯之器而不用; 使民重死而遠徙]¹⁵

Here, in *Mononoke* (2007, episode 4: ‘umibōzu’), a sub-character’s terse account of a bunch of *mononoke* is telling: ‘since tools and objects have souls as well, their variations are multifarious indeed.’ In other words, each *mononoke* is taken to have a soul as a supernatural or godly-natured ‘material’ or ‘matter’ (物 *mono*),¹⁶ but also each *mono* is an instrument or ‘container’ (器) to embody the union of *ayakashi* and *ke* (妖怪). This embodiment of the union within *mononoke* is its

¹² Mawangdui: 大方無隅 大器免成 大音希聲 天象無刑 道褒無名 夫唯道 善始且善成; Guodian: 運大方亡隅 大器曼成 大音希聲 天象亡形 道□□□□ [this remaining of the slip is broken].

¹³ As another version, the Mawangdui *Laozi*, reads 器 (*qi*), i.e. ‘container’ or ‘instrument’, where the received version reads 勢 (*shi*), i.e. nourishing ‘power’ or ‘outside forces’, the translator Ryden explains (2008, p. 179): ‘both refer to the same thing, namely the final shaping of the material that the Way has generated and life force nourished.’ Here, we prefer the Mawangdui version of 器 for a clarificatory purpose that there is a direct implication in 物刑 [形] 之而器成之, which reads ‘if matter forms things, then the [formed] container completes them.’

¹⁴ Mawangdui: 道生之 而德畜之 物刑之 而器成之.

¹⁵ Mawangdui: 小邦寡民 使十百人之器毋用 使民重死而遠送. Following Ryden’s reading (2008, p. 184) and the Mawangdui versions, we omitted ‘not’ (不) before 遠送 in the received version.

¹⁶ Though confusing for non-Japanese audiences, the ‘material’ or ‘matter’ (物 *mono*) does not connote an ordinary ‘thing’ in terms of *mononoke*. As Koyama Satoko puts it (2021, p. 3), in Japanese narratives of *mononoke* (物氣/物怪), previously called ‘monoke’, ‘bukukai’, or ‘mononosatoshi’, in the ancient and medieval (and even contemporary) times, the *mono* in *mononoke* relates to godly or vaguely supernatural entities. They are infuriated and bad-tempered at human events, and thus the term ‘mononoke’ is a sign of premonition that a great disaster may happen in future.

identification in the first keyword, ‘form’ (形). In other words, as seen in *Laozi*, ch. 11, *mononoke* is a clayed or materialised container, as it were, and its usefulness rests entirely on a beingless state or *nothingness* (無). Because every *mononoke* is nothing or does not actually exist, it is *possible* that it contains everything that is *necessarily* generated from the path, *Dao*.

To that effect, the prior chapter in the *Laozi*, ch. 10, reinforces the relationship between the necessary generator, *Dao*, and a possible container like *mononoke* (Ryden, 2008, pp. 23, 171, modification added): ‘She [*Dao*] generates them; nourishes them;¹⁷ she generates yet does not own them; she quickens yet does not possess them; she stewards yet does not master them. She is called “abstruse life force [玄德 profound virtue]”.’ In this context of the *Laozi*, ‘virtue’ (德 *de*) is not merely moral in the human sense, but also an energy of life in creatures, plants, and what are created on earth. Therein *mononoke* can be included to the extent to which it is not possessed and controlled by *Dao*. Put differently, it is rather possessed by dead or living humans’ ill-disposed emotions (怪 *ke*) on their own path.

Similarly, in ch. 28, *mononoke* is a possible ‘container’ as likened to a lump of wood that can be shuddered into pieces. No matter how invisible the smallness may be, Daoist ‘perennial life force’ (ch. 28) may necessarily percolate through every tiny piece that remembers its original *Dao*. Indeed, the *mononoke* path is to be traced back to the source. As in ch. 31, there are two ways of life: either dwelling on a lump of containers or instruments of bad omens, such as detrimental weapons of war,¹⁸ or going along *Dao* by avoiding the former way. If a created and embodied *mononoke* is used as the former harmful tool, then that indicates possession of unfortunate people’s deadly emotions (怪) away from *Dao*. To this effect, every *mononoke* remains incomplete (ch.

¹⁷ See also *Laozi*, ch. 51 in the above quotation.

¹⁸ See also *Laozi*, ch. 80 in the above quotation.

41: 大器免[曼/晚]成 ‘the great container [or instrument] is not [yet] completed’). Instead, returning and adhering to the original good and great path (*Dao*), albeit nameless, leads to the completion of things (ch. 41). This does not mean that *mononoke* cannot forever attain a completion for itself. In fact, the form of *mononoke* eventually reaches a certain completion, i.e. rest in peace, in the *Mononoke* tales. As understood from ch. 51, whilst the material nature ‘embodies’ things like *mononoke*, the final ultimate ‘form’ or ‘punishment’ (形/刑) of those containers is a completion of their life. The completed form of a distorted *mononoke* path can be in ultimate accordance with *Dao*. Therefore, as ch. 80 suggests, when realising the cessation of detrimental weapon-like containers, people involved may end in solemn respect for the *mononoke*’s ‘death’ or rest in peace, and renunciation of unnecessary ‘travel’ or making the *mononoke* deviate from the original path (*Dao*). That is why the medicine seller identifies the ultimate ‘form’ of *mononoke* – once deformed ghost – and lets it go towards a nameless source (*Dao*) that brought it about in each tale.

After the first step, in *Mononoke*, the medicine seller moves to identify the second and third keywords, ‘truth’ (真) and ‘reason’ (理) – or ‘genuine reason’ (真理) altogether. On our rendering, these words can be assimilated to the Daoist meaning of ‘way’ or ‘path’ (道 *dao*). This is because the protagonist can be seen as revealing a *Dao*-aligned path of each *mononoke*, so that each can be guided to rest in peace in the end. To this end, the protagonist uncovers great ‘truth’ (facts) and ‘reason’ (regretful excuses of involved people) in the sad and furious narratives of *mononoke*. In these ending scenes, the narratives are reflected from or within the perspectives of *mononoke*, each of which was affected and possessed by unforgivable emotions (*ke*) of ill-disposed human sufferers (see the synopsis in Table 1).

In more detail, the ‘truth’ is a morally unacceptable fact about a killed or mentally-shattered human (or humans), whose negative,

gnarled emotions (*ke*) possessed their *mononoke*. On the other hand, the ‘reason’ is expressed as an apologetic confession of another human or a bunch of people who tortured the killed human (or humans) from the *mononoke*’s points of view. In a sense, each *mononoke* (e.g. ‘zashikiwarashi’ and ‘nopperabō’) is quite sympathetic to and defends the tortured, vulnerable human that it possesses. It seeks atrociously to justify the ‘truth’ of the facts of the human’s suffering in their stead. Therefore, it forces gathered people, who either tortured or killed them (or themselves), to answer the ‘reason’ behind the truth.

Then, in his capacity of exorcism, the protagonist medicine seller aligns the uncovered truth and reason to the path (*Dao*) of *mononoke*, so as to release the gnarly emotions of the tortured humans. For the emotions are sickly imprinted on the soul of *mononoke* (e.g. a cat became the ghost cat ‘bakeneko’ after it licked the blood of a killed woman on a railway or path). On this point, somewhat appropriately, the English occultist Aleister Crowley – a proclaimer of the reincarnation of the ancient Daoist mystic ‘Ko Yuen’ (葛玄 Ge Xuan) – regarded the ‘Path’ (*Dao* [*Tao*]) as ‘Reason’. In the introduction to his translation of the *Laozi* (*Tao Teh King*), Crowley interprets that *Dao* is the reason, because ‘the substance of things may be in part apprehended as being that necessary relation between the elements of thought which determines the laws of reason’ (1975, p. 4).¹⁹ Surprising as it may appear, Crowley’s occultic account testifies to the reason that has given rise to *mononoke*, i.e. the ‘necessary relation’ between negative emotions of humans and their illusory psychological possessions through the embodiment of *ayakashi* and *mono*.

In the next section, in contrast to the historical construal from the

¹⁹ Crowley keeps on his account of *Dao* as reason (1975, pp. 4–5): ‘the only reality is that which compels us to connect the various forms of illusion as we do. It is thus evidently unknowable, and expressible neither by speech nor by silence. All that we can know about it is that there is inherent in it a power (which, however, is not itself) by virtue whereof all beings appear in forms congruous with the nature of necessity.’ This, we think, is quite a Daoist reasoning.

Laozi, we will delve into another construal of *mononoke* in a modern, if not too new, sense. This modern construal will enable us to analyse the three *mononoke* keywords in the form of a valid and sound argument.

2. Peircean Defence of the Mononoke Keywords

The second section will further defend the importance of *mononoke* from a modern pragmatic perspective. This we will stipulate in accord with C.S. Peirce's three normative steps from logic, ethics, and aesthetics. It is the pragmatist Peirce who enunciated the inseparable development from logic to aesthetics ('esthetics' in his writing) in view of 'the normative sciences' that concern 'what ought to be',²⁰ on which it can be seen that he based his pragmatism (or pragmaticism).²¹ Whereas the final aesthetical part remains incomplete, inconsistent, and thus vague at times (Liszka, 2017, p. 206). Be that as it may be in Peirce scholarship, there are pragmatic suggestions galore in support of the three philosophically-loaded keywords in *Mononoke*: i.e. 'form', 'truth', and 'reason'. Through Peirce's analysis in the three steps, *mutatis mutandis*, we argue for the immaterial existence of *mononoke* in our contemporary digital life. To this end, primarily in the context of *Mononoke*, we will analyse what we call 'mononoke argument'.

In the *Mononoke* animation folktales, for instance, a kitten was indebted to an innocent village girl who cherished and nurtured it to get out of a palace prison in her stead, such that it was natural for the kitten to repay for her mercy. That is, the cat turned into the *mononoke* *bakeneko* to take revenge on those who tortured and led the girl to

²⁰ Peirce defines that '[a] normative science is one which studies what ought to be [...], logic, ethics, and esthetics, which are the families of normative science, are simply the arts of reasoning, of the conduct of life, and of fine art' (CP 1.281). See also CP 1.191; 2.197, etc.

²¹ 'The true nature of pragmatism cannot be understood without them', i.e. the three sorts of normative sciences (CP 8.256).

death. On its own terms, the revenge does justice to the bakeneko with its deep-seated grudge against the torturers. For the bakeneko, it is nothing but a morally just and beautiful act, which is upended to horrifying ugliness for humans in the bloodshed scenes. In the end, the bakeneko's fury and sorrow are to be conciliated in the medicine seller's capacity of listening and understanding, albeit in his act of killing. In this way, immaterial beings, such as *mononoke*, are formerly understood in traditional and modern folktales. On the other hand, if our interpretations of Daoism, Chinese historical relevance, and Peirce's pragmatist normative approach are incorporated into future folkloristics, then the non-human immaterial can be further represented in the digital age. Put another way, the logic in their embodied form (P1), the truth-making moral psychology (P2), and reason or reasoning to appreciate their beauty or ugliness on their own terms (P3) shall make sense to understanding the immaterial, no matter how far the digital age may proceed.

In what follows, we will regiment an argument that is provable with three premises (abbreviated as 'P'), which focus on each of the three keywords in the *Mononoke* tales:

- (1) Form = P1: *logic* 'in regard to representations of truth'²²
- (2) Truth = P2: (represented true or false) *ethics* 'in regard to efforts of will'
- (3) Reason = P3: (intended) *aesthetics* 'in objects considered simply in their presentation'

The three keywords can be premised in accord with Peirce's descriptions, and connected to one another in the interests of our *mononoke argument*. That is, premise 1 lends itself to premise 2, which then implies premise 3. The argument as such, albeit particular and intrinsic to the animation, can be relevant to the general characteristics

²² On each description of *logic*, *truth*, and [*a*]esthetics, see Peirce, CP 5.36.

of *mononoke/yōkai* in monster studies as well as in digital humanities. Here is thus:

Mononoke argument

- P1. There is a form of *mononoke* (物怪/妖怪 = 妖 *ayakashi* + demonic 怪 *ke*).
[logic]
- P2. If there is a *mononoke* form, then there is truth about its demonic emotions. [ethics]
- P3. If there is truth about the *mononoke's* emotions, then there is good reason for its ugliness. [aesthetics]
- C. Therefore, there is good reason for the *mononoke's* ugliness.

The conclusion ('C') of this argument (deduced by *modus ponens* and *hypothetical syllogism*) is the argument itself, which states that there is good reason for the ugly *mononoke* (demon) in its aesthetic sense. To evaluate the entirety of beauty, one cannot merely see to what is beautiful or not, but rather, one *ought* to deliberate the logic (i.e. formality) and ethics (i.e. goodness) behind beauty or ugliness. This normativity of 'ought' or normative reasoning in *Mononoke* resonates with that of Peirce.

For instance, in a piece of correspondence to William James, Peirce summarises the normative sciences of three sorts, as follows (1902; CP 8.255, emphasis and clarification added):

I had not really got to the bottom of [his 'completely developed system'] or seen the unity of the whole thing. It was not until after that that I obtained the proof that *logic* must be founded on *ethics*, of which it is a higher development. Even then, I was for some time so stupid as not to see that *ethics* rests in the same manner on a foundation of *aesthetics*,—by which, it is needless to say, I don't mean milk and water and sugar.²³

²³ Peirce continues to relate his view in the James correspondence: 'These three normative sciences correspond to my three categories, which in their psychological aspect, appear as Feeling, Reaction, Thought' (CP 8.256). See also CP 1.574 (clarification added): 'aesthetics relates to feeling, practices to action [or ethics to conduct], logic to thought.'

Indeed, Peirce's development within the normative sciences was not intended to lapse into an untasteful cup of diluted sweet milk. Instead, one ought to savour something 'ideal' (*summum bonum*, the highest good) as a natural consequence of one's deliberated logic and ethics.²⁴ This reasoning for the ideal aesthetic consequence can be reconstructed in the form of *mononoke* argument. Hence, in order for us to newly appreciate a logically-formed and ethically-founded aesthetic end of *mononoke*, the three premises shall be further parsed in the following.

2.1 Premise 1: There is a Form of Mononoke

The thought of *mononoke* will be first captured as a 'form' (形 *katachi*). For one thing, as discussed in the first section, the Daoist importance of 'container' or 'instrument' (器) can offer semantic support for the *mononoke* form in the *Laozi* context. Furthermore, a logical foundation is key to understanding a certain formality of beings, including *mononoke* entities. The logician Peirce would go for his invented 'abductive' method (neither inductive nor deductive) in discovering patterns or laws in scientific practices, though we do not aim for scientific discovery but the identification of immaterial beings like *mononoke*. However, in his logical spirit, we advocate the necessity of simple yet fundamental propositional logic, viz. logical conjunction, in the formation of *mononoke*.

In other words, putting aside disjunction, negation, etc., it is the

²⁴ 'Esthetics is the science of ideals, or of that which is objectively admirable without any ulterior reason. I am not well acquainted with this science; but it ought to repose on phenomenology. Ethics, or the science of right and wrong, must appeal to Esthetics for aid in determining the *summum bonum*. It is the theory of self-controlled, or deliberate, conduct. Logic is the theory of self-controlled, or deliberate, thought; and as such, must appeal to ethics for its principles' (CP 1.191). Right after this, Peirce goes deeper stating that '[logic] also depends upon phenomenology and upon mathematics', whereas these two subjects are beyond the scope of this article.

very fundament of conjunction that empowers the logic of *mononoke* in its formulation. Thus, the formula for premise 1 is:

Conjunctive argument

- i. There is a ghost existing in this world, called *ayakashi* (妖 also pronounced *yō*).
 - ii. There is a human's demonic emotion, dead or alive, called *ke* (怪 also *kai*).
 - iii. Therefore, there are *ayakashi* (妖) and *ke* (怪), or demonic ghost *yōkai* (妖怪).
- [by premises i and ii]

Although we are not fully certain about the animation *Mononoke* producers' intention behind the conjunction of '妖怪', it is clear to the audiences who pay attention to the combination of the two Chinese characters. On account of the protagonist 'medicine seller', the '妖怪' (*yōkai*) is identified as *mononoke* (物怪), which is immaterial itself but does harm to humans in its demonic form.

Here, the demonic form of *mononoke* (P1) can be understood in a deliberated form of logical conjunction from i to iii in the above argument. If we deliberate and judge that the argument is sound (i.e. all the premises and conclusion are true and valid), then this logic is to enforce a series of 'representations of truth' as Peirce stated (CP 5.36). There is normativity at the beginning of the formalisation of *mononoke*.

2.2 Premise 2: If P1, then there is Truth about the Mononoke's Demonic Emotions

On the first logical basis, which we 'ought to' abide by in its normative sense, the second keyword, 'truth', is to be represented. This is paraphrased as premise 2, which is an implication from the antecedent (the former 'if' sentence) to the consequent (the latter 'then' sentence). In particular, the truth of the consequent is concerned with the justification

of its atomic sentence.

How to justify that consequent hinges on what make the sentence (or truth-bearer) true, the so-called ‘truth-makers’. Whilst the debate and art of truth-making are analytically metaphysical,²⁵ we can at least champion the existence of truth-makers *in virtue of* which concerned sentences are made true (or not false). As Peirce also stresses the ‘efforts of will’ (CP 5.36) in regard to ethics, truth-makers in ethics ought to involve one’s moral inclinations or wills. These, we think, make true the above consequent as well as the implication.

More precisely, in the *Mononoke* context, the truth-makers of moral wills are embodied as demonic emotions (怪 *ke*) of the sufferers, who are dead or still alive (see Table 1). Their tormented affects are the metaphysical causes in virtue of which the truth-bearer (P2 consequent) is held to be true. This is because, in communication with the ‘medicine seller’, the sufferers recount the truth of repressed emotions about their unjust experience and memory that gives rise to their demonic *mononoke* (*ayakashi* + *ke*). Put differently, out of the injustice of suffering humans, their demonic emotions justify the rise of *mononoke*. It is, therefore, morally just for the *mononoke* themselves to protect the human sufferers who possess demonic emotions. In fact, each *mononoke* buffers the sufferers from harm, i.e. people who tormented them, and it is willing to take revenge on such enemies.

The *mononoke* narratives of resentful demonic emotions are thus justifiable for the humans themselves, whereas their never-ending suffering in this material world needs to be terminated. Indeed, it is not morally just for those humans and *mononoke* to repeatedly cause further deaths of people well after their past events full of hatred. Therefore, the ‘medicine seller’ keeps on listening to the whole story, not just from the *mononoke* side, but also from the gathered people who imposed the initial suffering on those humans. Deliberating on the whole perspective,

²⁵ See e.g. Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984, p. 289.

the ‘medicine seller’ passes on an ethics of reconciliation between both sides, whilst letting the *mononoke* rest in peace for exorcistic purposes. The *mononoke*’s peace of mind is approached, though not yet fulfilled, by confirmation of the truth for moral justice and injustice in the ethics of human relations.

In so doing, the exorcist medicine seller makes the gathered people admit the ‘truth’ confessed through the *mononoke*, and lets them apologise to the sufferers. Whilst identifying the truth-makers of demonised ill-fated emotions possessed in the *mononoke*, the exorcist carries on the final understanding of ‘reason’ for their formative logic (P1) and relational ethics (P2). That is premise 3 with its aesthetic implication.

2.3 Premise 3: If P2 (Consequent), then there is Good Reason for the Ugliness

Since logic and ethics pave the path of normativity to the aesthetic end, as a consequence, the ideal completion of aesthetics shall be implied from Peirce’s and the *mononoke*’s perspectives. That is, the *mononoke* does justice to their beauty on their own terms – otherwise ugliness – from the moral antecedent (i.e. the consequent of P2) to the aesthetic consequent of P3. This implication constitutes the ‘reason’ for which people, gathered in a metaphysical space by the *mononoke*, regretfully acknowledge their moral wrong-doings. Hence, the implication from ethics to aesthetics in the third premise is appreciated truthfully by the exorcist and the gathered people, whereby the *mononoke* rests in peace.

This aesthetic consequence, in our interpretation, signifies the ideal or the best imaginable in its normative sense. This reason or reasoning was vindicated by Peirce somewhat constantly (CP 5.551, clarification added):

[I]t is in esthetics that we ought to seek for the deepest characteristics of normative science, since esthetics, in dealing with the very ideal itself whose mere materialization engrosses the attention of practics [or ethics]²⁶ and of logic, must contain the heart, soul, and spirit of normative science.

Accordingly, normativity in the three subjects is meant to embody the ideal aesthetic consequence. To the extent to which logic, ethics, and aesthetics are ‘the three doctrines that distinguish good and bad’, the ideal end refers to the aesthetic ‘objects considered simply in their [i.e. logical and ethical] presentation’ (CP 5.36, clarification added). Likewise, returning to the *Mononoke* context, one can normatively understand the aesthetic reason from the logical and ethical deliberation in the *mononoke* narratives.

From the three premises, therefore, the conclusion of the *mononoke* argument is deduced that ‘there is good reason for the *mononoke*’s ugliness.’ Here, we believe that there is no absolute and objective distinction between the ugliness and beauty of an object. This is the case when we consider that there is due reason for the *mononoke* becoming ugly. Put another way, its ugliness is not necessarily morally wrong, but it can be somehow justifiable to protect the suffering humans with miserable and distressed emotions. Thus, the logical form and the ethics regarding moral injustice are brought to light to realise the final reason for people’s regret in the exorcistic capacity of the medicine seller.

On the whole, by bringing logic, ethics, and aesthetics into our normative consideration, we can justify each truth of the three premises in the sequence of reasoning. It is in this sense that the *mononoke*

²⁶ Peirce distinguishes ‘practics’ and ‘ethics’ on his own terms (CP 1.573): the former concerns ‘the conformity of action to an ideal’, whilst the latter does ‘the conformity of conduct to an ideal’ as well as ‘the ideal itself’ and ‘the nature of the *summum bonum*’. This article awaits another occasion to clarify the two terms in Peirce. See also Liszka, 2017, p. 215; CP 1.577; 4.241, etc.

argument can be soundly evaluated.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, as with the medicine seller or exorcist, we can navigate ourselves to understand the aesthetic consequence of logic and ethics in the *mononoke* narratives. This is ultimately intended towards the ideal peace between the *mononoke* and gathered people. The peace is not a happy ending after some deaths of the characters in each story, whereas the suffering ugliness can be aesthetically appreciated when the *mononoke* eventually realises its rest in peace.

To this aesthetic goal, we have cashed out the three keywords in the *Mononoke* animation series (2006–07), whereby we engaged in the two types of interpretation of immaterial *mononoke* monsters in our times: historical and modern. On the one hand, in the historical *Laozi* context, we confirmed the importance of the first ‘form’ (形) as ‘container’ or ‘instrument’ (器) in accordance with the *Dao* (path) of truth and reason. On the other, in line with the modern pragmatist Peirce’s reasoning, the three keywords are rephrased to be the respective premises in the *mononoke* argument that we have analysed thus far. Certainly, our *mononoke* analysis is constricted within the two specific case studies with the past and modern texts (*Laozi* and Peirce). However, it is hoped that the analysis will open up a wider avenue to newly appreciating immaterial beings like *mononoke* or *yōkai* in the ongoing media studies and digital humanities.

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