



Peircean Semiotic Analysis of Visual Signs in the Princess Mononoke Film Poster

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes how visual signs construct meaning in the *Princess Mononoke* film poster using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework of icons, indexes, and symbols. As a form of visual communication, film posters function not only as promotional media but also as condensed narrative texts that convey thematic and ideological messages. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, this research examines key visual elements such as character representation, color contrast, spatial composition, gaze direction, and symbolic objects. Each element is categorized and interpreted based on its semiotic function to reveal how meaning is generated within the poster. The findings indicate that iconic signs support immediate character recognition, indexical signs point to conflict and relational tension, and symbolic signs convey cultural and ecological meanings related to identity and human-nature relations. Overall, the study demonstrates that the *Princess Mononoke* poster operates as an integrated semiotic system that communicates the film's central ecological and ideological concerns. This research highlights the relevance of Peircean semiotics for analyzing film posters as autonomous visual texts within visual and cultural studies.

INTRODUCTION

METHODS

FINDING AND RESULTS

The analysis of the *Princess Mononoke* poster focuses on identifying the visual signs that construct meaning through Peirce's triadic model of icons, indexes, and symbols. Following the semiotic procedure outlined in Sebeok (2001) and Nöth & Jungk (2015), the visual elements were first categorized based on their observable features before being interpreted through cultural and contextual lenses. As suggested by Thellefsen and Friedman (2023), a systematic classification of signs helps reveal how representational, relational, and symbolic meanings interact within a visual text. Because the poster contains a large number of sign elements, only representative data from each category are presented in the table below. These samples summarize the core patterns identified in the full dataset and serve as the basis for the subsequent narrative discussion, which connects the findings to existing theories and previous research included in the references.

Figure 1. Official Film Poster of *Princess Mononoke* (Source: Studio Ghibli Official Website, accessed 2025).

Table 1. Semiotic Categorization of Visual Elements in the *Princess Mononoke* Poster

Sign Type	Visual Elements	Description	Interpretation
Icon	San's face, facial features, and overall appearance	Resembles the character directly as depicted in the film	Establishes San's identity as the central figure and reflects her hybrid human-forest upbringing
Icon	The white wolf (Moro or her kin) behind San	Realistic depiction of the wolf spirit	Represents the spiritual and ecological authority of the forest; positions the wolf as San's guardian
Index	Blood on San's face and mouth	Indicates prior action or conflict	Suggests San's involvement in battle; reflects intensity, struggle, and resistance
Index	The wolf's posture and gaze directed toward the viewer	Points to relational alignment between San and the forest	Reinforces loyalty, protection, and the inseparable bond between San and nature
Symbol	Red markings on San's face	Carries cultural/emotional associations	Symbolizes aggression, threat, identity conflict, and spiritual connection
Symbol	San's mask (partially visible)	Symbol embedded with cultural meaning	Represents San's dual identity, human origin but spiritually aligned with animal spirits
Symbol	Fang necklace and fur clothing	Conveys ideological or cultural meaning	Signifies belonging to the wolf clan; symbolizes unity with the natural world
Symbol/Index	San's dagger (held forward)	Index of readiness + symbol object	Signifies confrontation, moral tension, San's protective intention toward the forest

Symbol	Dominant green and earth tones	Emotionally charged color coding	Represents ecological harmony, spirituality, and the centrality of nature
Symbol	Contrast between bright red (blood, markings) and muted tones	Color opposition creating meaning	Visualizes moral conflict, danger, and thematic tension between humans and nature
Index/Symbol	Dark forest background	Environmental cue that indicates setting	Suggests mystery, depth, and the sacredness of the forest environment
Index	Foreground–background composition (San front, wolf behind)	Spatial index guiding viewer focus	Emphasizes San as the narrative core while situating her within a powerful natural-spiritual hierarchy

DISCUSSION

The representative signs identified in the table reveal how the *Princess Mononoke* poster constructs meaning through a structured interplay of iconic, indexical, and symbolic elements. Rather than functioning independently, each visual component contributes to a cohesive semiotic system that communicates the film’s ideological stance on nature, conflict, and identity. As discussed in Nöth & Jungk (2015) and Sebeok (2001), visual texts often rely on interrelated signs that guide viewers toward culturally grounded interpretations. The poster reflects this principle by aligning its compositional, chromatic, and character-based elements into a unified narrative message. One of the strongest findings concerns San’s dual representation as both icon and symbol. Iconically, her portrayal resembles the character in the film, allowing viewers to recognize her instantly. Symbolically, however, her red facial markings and piercing gaze point to an identity shaped by conflict, resistance, and spiritual alignment with the forest spirits. The blood visible on her mouth functions as an index of prior struggle, reinforcing the narrative tension between humans and nature—a theme supported by Nöth & Jungk (2015) and Thellefsen & Friedman (2023), which highlight how indexical traces often signal violence, transformation, or emotional intensity. These layered meanings position San not merely as a protagonist but as an embodiment of the film’s moral and ecological conflict.

The presence of the white wolf behind San strengthens this interpretation. Iconically, the wolf visually represents Moro or her kin, while indexically it points to San’s deeper relational and spiritual ties to the natural world. The wolf’s direct gaze toward the viewer constructs a confrontational stance that aligns with findings from Wicaksono & Heriyati (2023), which emphasize how gaze direction modulates narrative authority. Symbolically, the wolf also signifies ancient wisdom and ecological guardianship, echoing the spiritual dimensions identified in Hossain & Fu (2014) and further elaborated in theories of indexicality found in Wirawan (2022).

Color symbolism in the poster strengthens these interpretations and plays a significant role in shaping emotional and thematic cues. While the Findings section focused on describing the colors individually, the broader discussion reveals how the contrast between earthy tones and the red markings on San's face emphasizes structural oppositions such as nature versus threat, harmony versus conflict. According to Yusof, et al (2025), such contrasts are commonly used in visual culture to highlight ideological tension. Studies in animated narrative analysis in Helmita & Diandri (2025) further argue that color arrangements function as interpretive cues that help audiences anticipate emotional trajectories. Within this context, the poster's palette reinforces the film's moral tension rather than merely decorating the composition.

The poster also uses objects and costume elements to convey ideological meaning. San's dagger serves as both an index of action and a symbol of her internal moral struggle, reflecting Peircean concepts of multi-layered interpretants as discussed in Thellefsen & Friedman (2023) and Yakin & Totu (2014). The fang necklace and fur clothing indicate her affiliation with the wolf clan, symbolizing a hybrid identity situated between human society and the spiritual world. These elements align with cultural analyses in Wright (2005) and Hossain & Fu (2014), which demonstrate how objects in visual texts often encode values and ideological positions.

Finally, the spatial composition enhances the poster's semiotic coherence. San's placement in the foreground establishes her as the focal center of the narrative, while the wolf and dark forest background contextualize her identity within a broader ecological hierarchy. The foreground-background relationship reflects visual hierarchy functions described in Wright (2005) and Batu (2012), where spatial positioning guides thematic emphasis and narrative interpretation. Through these compositional strategies, the poster visually asserts San's inseparable connection to the forest and its spiritual forces.

Overall, these elements show that the poster acts as a condensed narrative text, encoding themes of environmental ethics, identity conflict, and spiritual symbolism through a systematic arrangement of signs. The interaction of iconic, indexical, and symbolic cues not only aligns with Peircean semiotic theory but also reinforces findings from previous studies across your uploaded references. As a result, the *Princess Mononoke* poster functions as more than promotional imagery; it becomes a culturally resonant message that invites viewers to recognize the film's deeper ecological and moral dimensions even before watching it.

CONCLUSION

The semiotic analysis of the *Princess Mononoke* poster demonstrates that the visual composition operates as a condensed narrative that communicates the film's central ideological concerns even before the audience engages with the animated text itself. By applying Peirce's triadic framework of icons, indexes, and symbols, the study reveals how each visual component contributes to a multilayered system of meaning that extends beyond aesthetic presentation into culturally embedded and narratively significant interpretation. The poster does not merely depict characters or scenes, but instead constructs an integrated semiotic landscape in which identity, conflict, and ecological ethics intersect. The findings indicate that iconic signs, particularly the realistic portrayal of San and the wolf, serve as the foundation for audience recognition while simultaneously establishing the central relational dynamic between human and nature. These icons work as entry points that orient viewers toward the thematic focus of the narrative. Indexical elements, including the blood on San's face, the wolf's protective posture, and the spatial arrangement of foreground and background, further enrich the interpretation by pointing to actions, relationships, and narrative tensions that define the

film. These indexes subtly indicate past conflict, imminent danger, emotional alignment, and moral positioning, allowing the poster to communicate temporal and relational dimensions without explicit verbal text.

Symbolic signs amplify the ideological depth of the poster. The use of red markings, the fang necklace, San's mask, the color palette, and the contrasting tones operate at the symbolic level to convey cultural meanings related to spiritual identity, resistance, ecological balance, and the moral complexities inherent in human–nature interactions. These symbolic cues invite viewers to interpret San not only as a character but as a representation of broader themes such as environmental stewardship, hybrid identity, and the tension between destruction and preservation. The symbolic weight embedded in objects and colors further demonstrates how visual texts can encode layered philosophical and cultural commentary. Moreover, the poster's compositional structure reinforces the interconnectedness of these semiotic elements. The placement of San in the foreground, supported by the looming presence of the wolf and the forest backdrop, situates her agency within a larger ecological and spiritual hierarchy. This visual hierarchy mirrors the film's narrative structure, in which personal identity and moral choice are inseparable from the surrounding environment. The poster's interplay of scale, gaze direction, and spatial arrangement ensures that viewers immediately grasp the power dynamics and thematic significance at work.

Overall, the semiotic richness of the Princess Mononoke poster demonstrates that film posters function not merely as promotional tools, but as autonomous semiotic texts capable of conveying narrative, ideological, and cultural meaning. Through the interaction of iconic resemblance, indexical traces, and symbolic resonance, the poster encapsulates the film's core message: the inseparable relationship between humans and the natural world, and the ethical dilemmas that arise from this interdependence. This study reaffirms that visual media, when analyzed through a semiotic framework, offers profound insight into the cultural values and narrative structures embedded within contemporary popular culture. The poster ultimately serves as an effective visual gateway into the film's ecological discourse, encouraging viewers to recognize the narrative's deeper moral dimensions even before the first frame of the animation unfolds.

REFERENCES