



The Visuality of Virtue: Pre-Iconographic Analysis of Constructive Pride in Disney's *The Lion Guard*

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Abstract

This study investigates how *The Lion Guard* visually constructs pride as a constructive virtue, challenging the dominant view of pride as a destructive vice. Drawing on Panofsky's pre-iconographic methodology, the study identifies and interprets visual markers that encode pride at the level of form before symbolic meaning emerges. A systematic analysis of selected episodes (Seasons 1-3) reveals three interrelated dimensions: (1) Self-Image, wherein characters' postures, coloration, and personal artifacts signal individual dignity and self-respect; (2) Collective Existence, which depicts communal rituals and shared spaces that foster group cohesion, cultural continuity, and hierarchical stability; and (3) Existential Ecology, which links pride to the stewardship of the Pride Lands through recurring motifs such as Pride Rock, the Lion Guard's lair, and the "Circle of Life" narrative. These visual strategies demonstrate that pride functions as a foundational moral force that sustains both personal agency and ecological balance. The findings contribute to media-ecocritical scholarship by illustrating how animated texts can revalorise traditionally negative virtues, offering a nuanced model for future analyses of ethical representation in children's animation.

Introduction

The animated series *The Lion Guard*, a spin-off of Disney's *The Lion King*, offers more than child-friendly adventure; it constitutes a rich visual field in which moral effects are encoded, negotiated, and displayed. Within contemporary media studies, pride is habitually framed as a corrosive vice, linked to hubris, narcissism, or social domination (e.g., Tracy & Robins, 2007; Shariff & Tracy, 2009). Yet, philosophical traditions ranging from Aristotle's notion of *megalopsychia* to contemporary virtue ethics scholarship argue that pride can function as a regulative virtue, fostering self-respect, communal solidarity, and responsible stewardship (Hursthouse, 2013; Nussbaum, 2011). The tension between these divergent readings creates fertile ground for a pre-iconographic inquiry, which is an analytical tier that foregrounds the "primary or natural subject matter" of an artwork before symbolic interpretation (Panofsky, 1939). Several scholars in other disciplines have supported Panofsky's idea of identifying and describing basic forms, as they provide the starting point for interpretive analysis. Rudolf Arnheim foregrounds perception as the primary engine of art understanding, insisting that perceptual data – lines, shapes, rhythms, and spatial relations – are apprehended before any



interpretive coding. He avers that what the eye can see forms the baseline for interpretation (Arnheim, 1954). Svetlana (1980) also foregrounds the description of the visible surface, technique, and the viewer's encounter with the painting. She emphasises how description can lead to interpretation, insisting that precise observational work precedes broad interpretive claims.

Applying Panofsky's methodology to animation is significant. Recent work has demonstrated its utility for dissecting visual culture in children's media. McGowan (2022) employed pre-iconography to map gendered body language in *Peppa Pig*, while Lee and Kim (2021) used the same lens to trace ecological metaphors in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Both studies reveal that seemingly innocuous visual cues, such as posture, colour palettes, and spatial arrangements, operate as semiotic registers that shape viewers' moral intuitions. However, no scholarly articles have systematically examined how an animated narrative can reconceptualise pride as a constructive virtue through its visual grammar.

The present article therefore situates itself at the intersection of three scholarly streams: (1) virtue-ethics in media, which has begun to recognise pride's ambivalent moral status (e.g., Solomon, 2020); (2) ecocritical readings of animated ecosystems, which treat the "Circle of Life" as a narrative device for environmental ethics (Cox, 2019); and (3) pre-iconographic analysis of animation, which uncovers the material foundations of affective meaning (McGowan, 2022; Lee & Kim, 2021). By analysing selected episodes from Seasons 1–3 of *The Lion Guard*, this study identifies three interlocking visual dimensions: Self-Image, Collective Existence, and Existential Ecology, through which pride is rendered not as hubristic excess but as a stabilising moral force that underwrites individual dignity, communal cohesion, and ecological stewardship.

This study contributes to a methodological template for scholars interested in the moral economies of children's animation, expanding the theoretical conversation around pride beyond its traditional pejorative framing.

Methodology

Guided by Erwin Panofsky's three-stage model of visual interpretation (Panofsky, 1939), this study proceeds through a sequenced process that isolates description from interpretation, thereby preserving methodological transparency while allowing a deep reading of *The Lion Guard*. The first tier, pre-iconographic description, concerns the systematic cataloguing of pure visual facts (line, colour, size, spatial arrangement, movement, lighting, etc.) without invoking any cultural or symbolic meaning. In *The Lion Guard*, visual markers identified include formal attributes (size, proportion, posture, silhouette, movement trajectories), chromatic cues (hue, saturation, contrast that differentiate status), spatial positioning (centrality, elevation, proximity to iconic landmarks such as Pride Rock), symbolic devices (logos, insignia, recurring motifs such as the "Mark of the Guard"), and lighting and shading schemes that foreground or marginalise figures. Each marker is first recorded in its raw, pre-iconographic form and later connected to a conventional meaning in the iconographic stage. This approach is centred on a case study, utilising the film as a single text to explore in depth how it constructs a positive and nuanced concept of pride, offering a counter-narrative to the conventional view of pride as a vice.

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select episodes from Seasons 1–3 of *The Lion Guard*. Episodes were chosen to capture moments where pride is foregrounded, including initiation ceremonies, the "Savannah Summit," scenes featuring Pride Rock, and sequences that explicitly reference the "Circle of Life." This sampling strategy ensures coverage of the three thematic dimensions that emerge in the analysis: Self-Image, Collective Existence, and Existential Ecology.



Data collection followed a frame-by-frame protocol using video-analysis software. Every visual element that could function as a marker of pride was logged, noting the timestamp, screen position, formal attributes (size, colour, lighting, motion), and the presence of symbolic devices.

The data collected was analysed using qualitative content analysis, which maps the pre-iconographic inventory onto thematic categories derived from virtue ethics, ecocriticism, and media studies literature (e.g., self-respect, collective identity, environmental stewardship). A deductive coding scheme was constructed based on this literature and refined iteratively as coders applied it to the visual log entries, allowing emergent sub-codes, such as elevated posture implying authority and a golden palette implying regal legitimacy. The coded data were then aggregated into three overarching dimensions: (1) Self-Image (markers that articulate individual dignity and status), (2) Collective Existence (markers that signal communal rituals, shared symbols, and social hierarchy), and (3) Existential Ecology (markers that bind pride to the natural environment). This synthesis represents the iconographic level of analysis, linking formal visual facts to conventional narrative themes within the series.

Findings

A deeper exploration of the nuances of pride as a positive virtue was analysed as follows:

Essentialising Self-image in Human Pride

Self-image defines a social group's identity, values, dynamics and sense of belonging. In *The Lion Guard*, this construct is visualised through the Pride Landers, whose collective self-image reflects what the group represents, its self-worth, abilities and achievements. The film conveys these ideas through the characters' appearances, clothing, governing principles, behaviours, and actions. Physical descriptions reinforce the notion of pride; for example, the Lion Guard's leaders are portrayed with distinctive colours and stature. Simba, the Guard's leader, is depicted as a massive lion with striking red-iris eyes, deep tawny eyelids, dark brown whiskers, a pink nose, black-rimmed tawny ears, a robust build, broad shoulders, and brown-gold fur, underscoring his dominant role.

Simba's imposing stature signals his role as king, embodying strength and authority. This aligns with Tracy & Robins (2007), who argue that greater perceived size enhances pride and facilitates status acquisition. Likewise, Shariff and Tracy (2009) argue that individuals who perceive themselves as larger become more visible, thereby enhancing their perceived status. Darwin (1872/1998) similarly observed that a proud person "holds his head and body erect," making himself appear as large as possible, metaphorically "swollen with pride." The film reflects this idea, portraying most Lion Guard members as elevated through their size and shape.

The sense of sight is another feature that the film director has used to depict the self-worth of the Pride Landers. The size of their eyes is often the focal point, which clearly symbolises wisdom, vigilance and the ability to see both the physical and the spiritual world. Simba's eagle/hawk eyes give him the ability to manage and control over-ambitious, power-hungry animals like Zira. These features, colour of his eyes, physical strength and stature, depict his role as the protector and defender of other animals.



Figure 1: A pictorial illustration showing the size and stature of Simba, the leader of the Lion Guard

Alongside Simba, the author presents Kiara, the little princess and heiress of the Pride Lands; she has golden tan fur, reddish-brown eyes, and a purple nose, with a lighter underbelly, muzzle, and paws. Kiara, who is more optimistic, assertive and strong-willed about her future, keenly follows her father's discussion about the leadership of Pride Lands. Her golden tan fur, reddish-brown eyes, and purple nose give a distinct description from the rest of the Lion family, which showcases her uniqueness and strength in championing the welfare of women leaders in the Lion Guard.



Figure 2: An extreme shot of Kiara illustrating body size and stature

On the other hand, Kion, the secondborn of Simba, is depicted as a young lion, carefree, playful, immature and unbothered with what the future holds for him. Kion has a more youthful appearance compared to adult lions, with a mane that is not yet fully developed, reflecting his status as a young member of the Pride Lands. He has a light golden pelt and paler golden paws, underbelly, and muzzle, with scruffier fur on his upper cheeks and the base of his chest. He has a red hair tuft with a few bright red stripes and a bushy tail tip, which is the same colour as his hair tuft. His eyes are a deep orange-



brown, with dark, thick eyebrows set above them. He possesses a dark brown nose and whiskers. He has brown rims along the side of his light red-brown inner ears and black rims along the top. His complexion portrays him as a young, charismatic, and resilient cub, despite his childlike behaviour, which seems to upset his sister, Kiara.

These features, as depicted by the film director, play a role in Kion's leadership, where the indication of a youthful appearance and an undeveloped mane signifies his young age and his growth in terms of his role and responsibilities within the Kingdom. The light golden belt, with its lighter colouration, represents youth and vitality, contrasting with the darker, more mature belts of male adults. His red hair tuft, a unique feature, symbolises the bold and daring nature of Kion, regardless of his age.



Figure 3: A wide shot of Kion

Pride has also been depicted through the possession of the Guards' symbols of power. This responsibility plays a significant part in the Guard's identity, which is prominently displayed through their uniforms and accessories. The *Mark of the Guard* is an image that the film director has used as the most critical feature defining what it means to be a Pride Lander. According to Anderson (1991), the use of patriotic imagery forms the foundation of a common identity within an imagined community of shared national attachment. The presence and ownership of such patriotic imagery within a community, such as the Pride Landers in *The Lion Guard*, indicate a sense of patriotism and nationhood. The *Mark of the Guard* is a unique shield-shaped Lion's head symbol with a lion face in the centre, surrounded by tribal patterns given to members of the Lion Guard. At its core, the mark of the guard is a simple but powerful design, consisting of two distinct elements: a central circular emblem and a surrounding border or frame. The circular emblem is adorned with a stylised depiction of a lion's head, its features rendered with a bold and angular aesthetic that evokes a sense of strength and authority.



Figure 4: Physical appearance and description of the Mark of the Guard

The border or frame surrounding the central emblem is characterised by a series of intricate, geometric patterns, adding a layer of visual complexity and symbolism to the overall design. It is an emblem which plays a significant part in the Guard's identity and is prominently displayed on their uniforms and accessories. Individual communities use specific images to define and maintain their national identity, as Guibernau (2007) argues that such communities may employ a set of symbols, as well as rituals, to reinforce a sense of community.

For one to be inducted into the Lion Guard's leadership, he or she must receive the *Mark of the Guard*. Figure 5 shows Kion receiving the *Mark of the Guard* as he tries to use the Roar of the Elders. Therefore, when Kion gets the mark, he says, "No need to wonder. The choice is done. Now, I believe I truly am the one".



Figure 5: A pictorial illustration of the Mark of the Guard on Kion's shoulder



When an animal is inducted into the Lion Guard, the leader places their paw on their left shoulder. This causes the Mark to appear on the new member's shoulder, a phenomenon that is accompanied by the faint sound of a lion roaring. While the Mark of the Guard always appears as the head of a roaring lion, it takes a different size and colour to complement the species of its bearer. The bearers of the Mark of the Guard, therefore, become the official members of the Lion Guard, whose duty is to defend the Pride Lands from predators. Thus, when Kion bestows the Mark on his new team of Guards, he says:

"Bunga. You are the bravest.

Fuli. You are the fastest.

Ono. You are the keenest of sight.

Beshte. You are the strongest.

We are the Lion Guard."



Figure 6: An illustration showing Kion placing the Mark of the Guard on Ono's shoulder

This mark serves as a source of self-recognition and individuation, as Lion Guard members are directly able to identify themselves intrinsically and interact as a whole (Windari, 2021).



Figure 7: An extreme shot of Kion bestowing the Mark of the Guard on Rani's shoulder

Human Pride as a Celebration of Collective Existence

The concept of pride is a foundational pillar that shapes the lives and development of the Pride Landers. Unlike individual pride which focuses on personal achievements, collective pride in this context refers to the shared sense of identity, belonging, and accomplishment that unites the diverse animal inhabitants of the Pride Lands. This pride is not based on superiority over other lands, but on a collective commitment to the Circle of Life and the unique harmony maintained within their territory.

The sense of collective identity and belonging can be expressed through pride in a community or nation via events and national heroes (Sullivan, 2014). In *The Lion Guard*, the Pride Landers community participates in various public murals that help them to celebrate the community's heritage, struggles and achievements, fostering a shared sense of identity and pride among the members. For instance, animals adhere to the philosophies of the Circle of Life, which promote balance, respect, and interdependence. The Animals take pride in their role within this cycle, understanding that their individual existence contributes to the well-being of the whole. For example, the prey animals, while aware of their vulnerability, take pride in sustaining the predators, who in turn protect the land and its resources. This shared understanding fosters a sense of collective purpose that transcends individual species. For instance, in the episode "*The Savannah Summit*," Simba guides his son, Kion, to help resolve existing conflicts and thus promotes friendship. In such scenarios, Simba adopts a pluralist understanding of power on the basis that they assume competing animals, such as Makuu, who is the greatest enemy, are equally placed to shape the discussion and reach shared decisions through deliberation and participation, as Healey (1997; 2003), Innes (1996; 2004) contend. As Simba continues to teach his son Kion about leadership and authority, he reminds him to refrain from escalating the differences and avoid imbalances that may lead to conflicts by allowing Makuu to be part of the Summit.



Figure 8: Simba leading Pride Landers during the Savannah Summit

Cultural ceremonies, such as *Kupatana celebrations*, *Mbali Migration*, and *Ukumbusho traditions*, serve as platforms for cultural exchange, social bonding, and political discourse (Uwase, 2025). During *Kupatana*, predators and prey unite in song, symbolising unity and peace. Simba's oversight ensures safety, reinforcing his role as a unifying figure. Scholars argue that such embodied performances reinforce power dynamics (Covington-Ward, 2015; Roberts, 2013) while simultaneously fostering a "we-feeling" (Turner, 2006). Simba's role during the celebration involves not only participating in the festivals but also ensuring that all animals are safe and protected during the event. Drawing on his leadership experience and dedication to preserving peace in the Pride Lands, Simba actively supervises the celebration and promptly tackles any emerging threats or disruptions. His participation in the ceremony highlights the role of cultural ceremonies, as both Basuki (2006) and Toffin (2009) emphasise the use of cultural practices and ceremonies as a means of reinforcing power dynamics. Additionally, his presence at the celebration serves as a symbol of leadership and unity, inspiring other animals to come together in harmony. This aspect defines the national celebrations as forms of constitutional changes, as Hobsbawm (1990) avers.



Figure 9: A wide shot showing Simba with his family, instructing them on how to respect other members of the Pride Landers

Diverse composition is another aspect that promotes collective pride. The Guard's composition exemplifies inclusive pride: beyond lions, it includes a honey badger (Bunga), a cheetah (Fuli), a hippo (Beshte), and an egret (Ono). This diversity demonstrates that protection stems from varied talents, thereby strengthening collective confidence across species. Every animal can see their own kind contributing to the defence of their home.

Collective existence also entails the intergenerational transmission of societal values through the wisdom of elders like Simba, Mufasa, and Rafiki. For instance, in *The Lion Guard*, Mufasa serves as a grandfather figure who embodies a towering presence both physically and metaphorically, exemplifying the qualities of a true leader: strength, wisdom, and a deep sense of duty to his kingdom and family. He is responsible for maintaining the delicate balance of the ecosystem, ensuring that all members of the animal kingdom coexist in harmony. Mufasa helps Kion and the members of Lion Guard. This feature makes him a wise old man, as Jung says, "The old man thus represents knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness and intuition, on one hand, and on the other moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help" (Jung, 1980, p. 222).



Figure 10: A close-up shot of the Old Mufasa

The Centrality of Existential Ecology in Human Pride

Human pride has been expressed through narratives and the portrayal of the natural world in *The Lion Guard*. The study establishes that animal existence is not separate from nature, but fundamentally embedded within and dependent upon ecological processes. Furthermore, the study reveals that the bodies of the Lion Guard occupants are integral to the natural world, and their sense of self is deeply tied to their environment and the specific place they inhabit. The narrative employs rich, detailed depictions of the Pride Lands' physical geography, the philosophy of the Circle of Life, and the symbolic roles of Pride Rock and the Lion Guard's Lair to convey and express the concept of existential ecology.

The depiction of Pride Lands as epitomising the abundance of life that originally existed in Africa, with its diverse range of flora, including baobabs, and tall grasses, rolling hills, valleys, bushy land, rivers, and wide-open savannas, serves as a direct visual and conceptual representation of the image of existential ecology: inescapable interconnectedness. The use of vibrant colours, such as earthy yellows and oranges, with deep green and bright blue skies, further emphasises this vitality. Coad (2017) asserts that the Pride Landers are characterised by vibrant, earthy yellows and oranges for the land and mountains, with ephemeral purples, aqua, and blues for the sky and water bodies. Animations use these colours to evoke a sense of warmth and vitality, reflecting the richness of the African landscape (Johnson, 2018).

The vegetation of the Pride Lands supports a diverse array of wildlife, including lions, elephants, zebras, and numerous bird species (Williams, 2020), forming a complex, self-sustaining ecosystem that all inhabitants rely on. Seasonal changes give the landscape vivid hues: the rainy season produces greener pastures and blooming flora, while the dry season renders it more arid (Thompson, 2019). This richly detailed environment functions as a metaphor for the Pride Landers' authority and status as the realm's custodians, setting them apart from other groups.



Lighting techniques have been employed to reinforce thematic contrasts: high-key illumination portrays peace and harmony, while low-key scenes suggest danger or tension (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012). For example, bright shots of the Pride Lands emphasise serenity, whereas dimmer frames of the Outlands evoke a sense of threat. In contrast, a well-lit place with a high lighting style has been used by the cinematographer to depict a calm and peaceful environment in the Pride Lands. As the movie opens, a wide shot of the Pride Lands shows the place where light touches. In one episode, Beshte states that life in the Pride Lands is peaceful and so grand. Living is so easy, just you believe me. Beshte's statement emphasises the physical appearance of the Pride Lands, which is different from the rest of the other places in *The Lion Guard*.



Figure 11: A pictorial illustration of Outlands using low lighting style

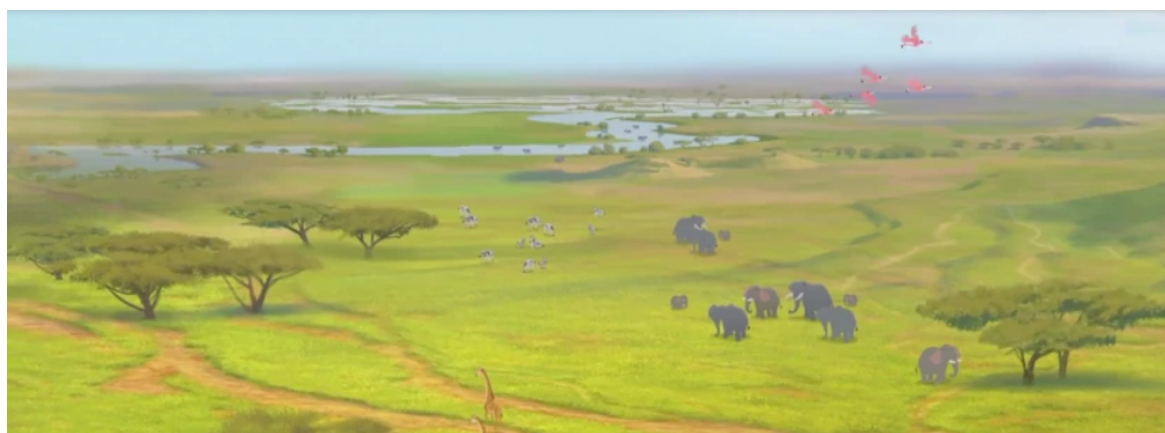


Figure 12: A pictorial illustration of Pride Lands using high lighting style

In the film, the Circle of Life philosophy is based on the conviction that every living being contributes essential functions to the ecosystem, which must remain balanced to avert disastrous outcomes. This philosophy, embodied by great leaders such as Simba, who takes over the throne, displacing Scar, ensures that the natural order is restored, translating the existential ecological principle of freedom and responsibility into a narrative framework. The philosophy defines the right way to exist within



the ecosystem. For instance, the banishment of hyenas for disregarding the principle of the Circle of Life by over-eating and over-hunting demonstrates the consequences of violating this ecological imperative, linking individual actions (or lack of responsibility) directly to environmental degradation and social exclusion. Furthermore, the Circle of Life can be understood as the space and group of identities that it hierarchizes: a bounded territory and a class system with its rulers, bureaucrats, foot soldiers, and outcasts; at its centre, it indicates patriarchal power.

Pride Rock and the Secret Lair function as spatial metaphors for stewardship. Pride Rock, elevated and commanding, symbolises authority intertwined with responsibility for ecological health. The Lair, a secluded sanctuary nestled beneath the rock, offers security and a focal point for strategic planning. Its guarded interior with rock formations, paintings of past Guards, a central pool feeding Lake Shangaza, embodies the protective enclave of knowledge and power.



Figure 13: An extreme wide shot of Pride Rock, one of the Iconic Landmark of Pride Lands



Figure 14: An illustration of the Inside of the Lair of the Pride showing Kion and other Lion Guard members

The vertical hierarchy between public (Pride Rock) and private (Lair) spaces reflects societal stratification (Sibley, 2012). These locations in the film are not just political centres but are linked to the protection of the Pride Lands' ecological integrity. The arms of authority and the history shared in the Lair underscore that leadership in the Pride Lands is synonymous with ecological guardianship. Kion's ability to levitate the entirety of Pride Rock in a moment of mastery and *Vitani's* inauguration further tie leadership and authority directly to the power to influence the landscape.



Figure 15: A long shot showing the elevation of the members of Pride Lands at the Lair, Promontory of the Pride Rock

Conclusion

This pre-iconographical analysis has demonstrated that the film *The Lion Guard* redefines the concept of pride, re-framing it from a destructive vice to a constructive virtue. Through a detailed examination of Pride as a Self-image, Pride as Collective Existence, and Existential Ecology, the study has shown how the film's visual markers convey a profound, multi-layered meaning. The physical attributes of characters, symbolic artefacts like the Mark of the Guard, communal rituals, and the rich depiction of the Pride Lands all serve to illustrate that pride is a vital force for forging individual identity and ensuring the well-being of the entire ecosystem. Ultimately, the film emphasises that genuine pride is not rooted in superiority or arrogance, but in a deep sense of self-worth, a shared commitment to community, and a responsible, harmonious relationship with the natural world. This virtuous portrayal offers a valuable lesson, suggesting that in a balanced and interconnected system, pride can be the very foundation upon which honour, dignity, and a thriving existence are built.

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