

Saussure semiotic of animals in *Zootopia* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out the meaning of the animal characters in the Zootopia movie. Zootopia is an animated movie that uses animals as characters; thus, it is challenging to analyze those animals since they brought different signs from common ones. Therefore, this research focuses on three animal characters e.g., mouse, rabbit, and fox which are considered as important signs in Zootopia that need to be interpreted. In interpreting the signs, this study employs Saussure's semiotic theory which relates to a sign that contains a signifier and its use or interpretation as signified. This research used qualitative methods. It is found that the stereotypes of the three animal characters in the movie are different from the common acceptance. Mouse which are dirty and poor are depicted differently as they are wealth and prosperous. Rabbit which are weak and fearful is depicted as strong and brave. The last is the fox which are sole and dangerous are described as sociable and harmless animals. Hence, the movie tries to break stereotypes about mouse, rabbit and fox. Finally, it is hoped that this study may create more awareness to see anything not based on its prevailing labels.

Keywords: Animals, Saussure, Semiotic, Sign, Zootopia

Article History: Recieved 15 Jun 2021, Final revision 25 Aug 2021, Published 31 Aug 2021

Introduction

Animal is an alternative role that is often used as a character in a film. There are several reasons why it is used in film production frequently. The first is that animals are entertaining; thus, humans exploit them to get benefits (Wilkins, 1981). The second reason is that animals also help to avoid sensitive factors, and offer emotional distance from difficult topics such as pain, violence, aversion, fear, and death (Sinha, 2015). The last reason for existing animals in the film is to raise awareness and empathy, so that the authors highlight specific character traits that can be linked to attract human emotions and vulnerabilities (Sinha, 2015). Those reasons are also found in a movie in the title *Zootopia* (2016). Byron Howard and Rich Moore as the directors of the movie managed to present the storyline about the reality of human behaviors, yet they use animals as the characters instead.

To know what resembles animals in movies, a semiotic theory is thus needed. Semiotic is a study about signs and symbols, in which the

signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts, or objects and invests such things with meaning (Chandler, 2019). One prominent figure of this theory is Ferdinand de Saussure. Ferdinand de Saussure divided signs into two parts: every sign is made of sound-images or signifiers and the concepts generated by the signifiers, signified (Berger, 2013). Moreover, Saussure's sign theory places more emphasis on internal structures that are devoted to cognitive thought processes or activities of the human mind in composing physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs from the environment or surroundings, and among them are the structure of linguistic signs in language systems that allow they function as humans and communicate with each other (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Hence, a sign contains a signifier which is interpreted as a meaningful idea, and *signified* as a mental image, thought, or concept (Chandler, 2017, p. 14).

As animals in *Zootopia* are challenging to be studied further using Saussure's semiotic

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.30595/lks.v15i2.10713>, © 2021 Leksika. All rights reserved.

theory, this study aims to find out the semiotic meaning of animal characters in *Zootopia*. The meaning is identified using Dyadic Model by Saussure that is divided into *signifier* (the sound pattern of a word, both in mental projection - such as when we silently recite lines of poetry), and also *signified* (the concept or meaning of a word) (Borgo, et al., 2013). Accordingly, animal characters in *Zootopia* film are considered as signs that contain a *signifier* by having a meaning or *signified* concept beyond its general meaning. The illustration of animal characters in the movie is not only to entertain the audience (Wilkins, 1981), yet it also raises another understanding that is different from reality. This phenomenon can be seen in a study entitled Semiotic Analysis of Valak and Lorraine in "The Conjuring 2" Film by Yulia Sofiani Zaimar (2017), in which she indicated that The Conjuring 2 is not only a horror film for pleasuring people by seeing the sign and code, but also the film provides lessons in reality

Research Method

This research utilized qualitative methods in developing information and thoughts. As stated by (Palmer&Bolderstone, 2006), qualitative research is the most suitable and often used in analyzing literary works. It is because literary works are often referred to as systematic reviews by comparing findings from qualitative studies (Grant & Booth, 2009). In this study, the researchers also compared the findings of the analysis. Other than that, the purpose of qualitative methods was also to give understanding when describing an event from various perspectives, so it was closely related in terms of understanding literary works that can produce different perspectives (Sofaer, 1999). To support this analysis, the researchers investigated for some accurate information from many sources related to the issue of the research.

There were several steps in processing data from this research. The first step was watching

related to the consequences of deviating from social norms in considering the particular fears exploited in horror films.

Another research that provides an understanding of reality is from Robingah entitled Pierce's Semiotics Analysis on Benny's Cartoons Related to COVID 19 Issues (2020). This study focuses on understanding the signs contained in the cartoon about the issue of the corona virus. Based on this research, cartoons do not only function as entertainment but also provide awareness to the audience regarding facing living conditions during a pandemic. Those previous studies are actually evidence that films are not only entertainers, yet can provide a different picture that brings the audience's perspective. Therefore, this research which is also focuses on a cartoon movie attempts to reveal the connection between animal characters in movie and the representation of those in reality.

and re-watching the movie entitled *Zootopia* to comprehend the whole story. The second step was taking a note on which animal characters are appropriate to analysis. Then, the third was focusing on the three selected animal characters to be analyzed. Next, collecting the secondary data sources related to the semiotics of the animal characters in the movie. The final step was reducing unnecessary data which are not needed to strengthen this study.

After all the necessary data were collected, researchers interpreted and analyzed three animals in *Zootopia*. In analyzing, it is focused to find out the meaning of animals in general, their existence in the film, and the signifier and signified based on Saussure semiotic theory. Finally, the conclusion wrapped up the ideas and analysis of this study.

Results & Discussion

In this discussion and findings section, there are three animal characters from *Zootopia* that are going to be analyzed. Those are mouse, rabbit, and fox. In finding out the meaning of

each animal, the theory used is Saussure's semiotics. The application of Saussure's semiotic theory is related to understanding the

meaning of a sign based on the *signifier* and *signified*.

Mouse: Clean and Prosperous

Mouse is the first animal needed to be elaborated. In general sense, a mouse is an animal that has slender body, blunt or tapered muzzle, scantily haired, prominent ears, narrow hind feet with bald soles, and sharp, small claws (Musser, 2020). Mouse is also a hardy creature that is found in nearly every country and type of terrain; they can live in forests, grasslands, and manmade structures easily (Bradford, 2015). It is not surprising that mouse is often found in every house, and they usually live in dirty corners of the house. Other animals may also live in a house, but they have different treatment from the owner. As pets of the house, the owner will guarantee the pets to get what they need. The pets commonly are in clean condition and full stomach. These are different from mouse. Instead of getting the same treatments with the pets, people tend to consider them as the pest. They must be avoided since they are dangerous. They may carry diseases; hence, mouse is impecunious.

In Indonesia, the voracious of mouse is commonly used as sign to express the actor of corruption. Indonesian correlates the mouse as they always take everything without considering that what they have taken is not their belonging. Besides, we often find that mice eat anything, they even love chewing wires, soft concrete, wood (structure and furniture), drywall, rubber, plastic pipes, insulation, and aluminum (Bradford, 2015). The elaboration of the behavior of mice as eating everything is an explanation that mice are often categorized as greedy and useless animals for humans.

However, the mouse is totally different from the picture in the *Zootopia* movie. In several scenes, mouse's presence in the film is described as being so quirky and attracting attention. It is very different from real life as in this kind of life the mouse is depicted as dirty and poor. In the film, the mouse character is presented as a luxurious animal. The luxury of mouse character can be seen through his position as a boss which hires two big bodyguards played by the white bear characters. Moreover, there is even a scene that shows a small clean and orderly town specifically for mice as an illustration of the

success of the rats in developing their town well. In addition, they are also presented as rich animals because they are able to hold a grand party, while mostly in reality only rich people can afford to spend their money on a grand party.

In using Saussure's semiotic theory, the mouse character is considered as a *signifier* that has its own meaning which will convey the *signified*. Thus, when applying the theory of *signifier*, a mouse character is seen as a small rodent that has a pointed snout, a slightly long body and a slender tail (Webster, 2021). Meanwhile, the different presentation of a mouse in the film leads to the *signified*; because it provides another meaning of *signifier*. In Saussure theory, *signified* is the psychological part, the reaction to the object, the mental picture a signifier evokes; the internal response to the signifier (Zaimar, 2017). The way the mouse character is depicted in the film was identified as *signified* of a clean and prosperous animal. Those things come out as the reaction to the object by seeing the appearance of the mouse in the movie.

The existence of mice in life is actually considered a dirty and poor animal. It is because mice often appear in messy houses, they usually live in areas that are rarely touched by the occupants of the house. Their habit of leaving bite marks on some items, proves that they are poor animals. In contrast, in the film the mouse character is portrayed as a spotless and rich animal. The costume the mice wore was neat black suits complete with the suitcase. Since black suits also tend to depict someone who is already established in economic terms, so that they have more rational minds and have an ideal future (Young-Sam Kim, et al., 2014). There is an opposite meaning between mouse in reality and in the film. The film tries to give different point of view that rats are not always dirty and poor. In this discussion, *Zootopia* film industry tries to give the audience an understanding that a mouse can also be a proper and wealthy animal. In the reality of life, mouse is categorized as needy animals because they eat everything, they can find no matter it can harm them; however, it is presented in a different light in the movie since mouse can eat anything as they are rich and can afford whatever they want. Thus, it can be concluded that the presentation of the mouse character in

the film is to break what is considered poor and dirty can become rich and clean. The movie breaks the stereotype of the mouse by one different element, the food. However, if it is studied deeper, it is the food, the crucial element that can differentiate the class. People may guess in what level someone by considering where they eat. When people eat in food stall people may ignore them as they are not important as people who eat in fancy restaurants. This is the delivered message in *Zootopia* which reveal that people may have different labels when they have means to change the labels. It may also be said that not all with the same criteria might have been in the same category as there might be some other significant points differ them.

Rabbit: Vigorous and Courage

Secondly, it is rabbit. Generally, rabbits are small, furry mammals with long ears, short fluffy tails, and strong, large hind legs (McClure, 2020). By using their powerful hind legs, rabbits can move by hopping and also they have four toes on their hind feet that are long and webbed to keep them from spreading apart as they jump (McClure, 2020). Rabbits have a fear of predatory animals, they can also be afraid of loud noises, unfamiliar people or animals, and new objects placed in the home or yard. Therefore, they will jump away to avoid objects that are considered prey. Other than that, rabbits are often found in groups, they are reluctant to join other animals. Basically, rabbits are afraid of anything, so they are considered to be weak animals. It is why rabbits are widely used as pets, because of their adorable and harmless shape.

In the movie, rabbit is the main character as it always appears throughout the film. It is because the storyline in *Zootopia* movie is one's struggle which is the rabbit to achieve her dream in work and also make her colleagues believe in her abilities. The role portrayed by the rabbit character in the film is very inversely related to reality. In addition to being the main character, the rabbit is told as an animal that does not give up and is brave. The rabbit's persistent spirit led to the result that officially accepted as a police officer. It is impossible if it is said that a rabbit is capable of being a cop. Moreover, in the film, a rabbit is also shown to be able to blend in with other strong animals. A

rabbit is also depicted as not at all afraid of other beast characters, instead befriending a fox.

When finding out the meaning of the rabbit using Saussure's semiotic theory, we must understand the *signifier* firstly. *Signifier* in Saussure theory is about the physical part; or tangible we see or hear (Zaimar, 2017), so based on human eyesight about the physical size of a rabbit, it implies that a rabbit is a small animal that usually lives in holes in the ground and has long ears, soft fur, back legs that are longer than its front legs (Webster, 2021). However, based on what the rabbit is presented in the movie, the rabbit is a very brave animal, due to its role as a cop which shows so many activities the rabbit did. Thus, in Saussure's semiotic theory regarding *signified*, we notice that the rabbit character has two distinct meanings, that are strength and bravery. It is based on the reaction of seeing the role of the rabbit in the movie, which gives a different vision. Moreover, the rabbit character in the film is a female which is always consider less powerful than male. However, it can be a police officer. Being a policewoman has a meaning that although the animal is weak and female one, it breaks a stereotype. This is because a female who enters the police force are faced with the task of challenging since the male dominated structure (Fernandes, 2011). It was also shown in the film that the rabbit had to work hard to be an officer and to prove that she was exist. She turned the table when she succeeded solving a big case causing everyone appreciates her.

In reality, a rabbit is just a mammal that can jump and has long ears and soft fur. There have been many humans who consider rabbits as adorable and harmless animals, so they keep them at home. Meanwhile, *Zootopia* film changes the view of a rabbit to be brave and never give up. A rabbit is depicted to be an animal that is not afraid, even of strong and predatory animals. A rabbit in the film is a female character. It can be attributed that rabbits and women are creatures that are considered weak in real life. Basically, a rabbit is an animal that is considered weak and not ferocious, it is the same as the society's perception that women are powerless. In this discussion, *Zootopia* is trying to incorporate different thoughts about that, so the depiction of the rabbit character also represents women since it is a female and became one of the main

characters. In the movie, the rabbit is packaged to be brave and willing to fight for her position as a police officer. Meanwhile, a rabbit and woman are considered incapable of occupying the position of a cop in real life, due to the view that they are weak creatures and the police need strong creatures. However, the struggles described by the rabbit prove that she has succeeded in becoming a cop and even able to solve tough cases. Thus, the depiction of a female rabbit tries to break the stereotype of society that the weak can become strong and adventurous.

Fox: Sociable and Harmless

The last is a fox. Fox is generally carnivorous mammals that is light on their feet, often mistaken for other members of the Canidae family, such as wolves and dogs. They stand out from their relatives because of their long thin legs, flexible body, pointed nose. and bushy tail (Bradford, 2018). Based on their habitat, fox usually lives in forest areas, although they are also found in mountains, grasslands and deserts. They make houses by digging holes in the ground. They also tend to live alone. Fox is omnivorous animals that can eat small animals, such as lizards, mice and rabbits. Besides, fox is rarely kept by people because they are considered dangerous and too wild, and the food they have to provide also requires more effort.

In *Zootopia*, fox is also one of the characters that often appears. His role as a companion to the rabbit character in helping solve a problem. That is very different from the common description that a fox eats a rabbit. In the film, the fox is initially depicted as a manipulative beast, but ends up being a reliable partner. Other than that, the fox character is also not depicted as being too evil. The fox was even told as a victim of violence by his friend. Thus, he had a trust issue with the rabbit and tricked her.

Based on Saussure's semiotic theory, the fox character in the film is a whole that results from the association between the *signifier* and the *signified*. In Saussure's theory, when analyzing the meaning of a sign, we must recognize a combination of *signifiers* with particular *signified*. Firstly, identify the *signifier* that is commonly interpreted as the *material (or physical) form* of the sign - it is something which

can be seen, heard, touched, smelt, or tasted (Chandler, 2019). Then, when applying the theory of *signifier*, the fox character is seen as a carnivorous mammal of the dog family related to but smaller than wolves with shorter legs, more pointed muzzle, large erect ears, and long bushy tail (Webster, 2021). However, based on what has been shown in the film, the fox character has its own meaning. This meaning is indicated as a *signified* theory from Saussure. The *signified* is a mental construct and a *concept* in the mind - not a thing but the notion of a thing (Chandler, 2019). Accordingly, based on the concept formed in the mind, the fox character in the film is identified as hospitable and innocuous. Since fox's character is different from what it should be, the fox makes a friendship with a rabbit which is his food in reality.

In visible life, a fox is a carnivorous animal that lives in forests, deserts, or mountains. Foxes are categorized as quite dangerous animals. This is different from the depiction of the fox character in *Zootopia*. The fox character is shown as a harmless animal. It is even told that the fox is a victim of violence with other animal characters as its friend. Besides, foxes also make friends with a rabbit, which is their consumption in reality. It can be concluded that the movie tries to show that dangerous animals are not always harmful, as they can make friends with animals that are considered weak. It also gives viewers, especially children, the view that a fox is not always a terrible animal. Furthermore, it also gives an understanding that those who are considered dangerous and terrible are not always like that, and that they can also be good friends. By seeing the show in the movie about the fox character which is originally a scary animal, but it is described as being able to establish good relations with other weak animals such as rabbit.

The three animal characters have a similar meaning, that is about breaking stereotypes that occur in society which is depicted through animals in *Zootopia* movies. The three animal characters provide a different picture from their existence in real life. In the movie, the three animal characters are shown as animals that are significantly different from what society thinks in reality. The depiction of the mouse character in the movie is to break the stereotype that something considered dirty and poor can also

be rich and clean. Likewise, a rabbit that is presented as a female character is able to get her rights as a police officer. Then, a fox who has always been considered a ferocious beast, gives a different perspective in the movie that it can even be affable with a rabbit which is considered as his diet. Accordingly, it can be concluded that *Zootopia* film provides the

opposite understanding of animals from the general perspectives in society. It can broaden the audience's view of something they see is not necessarily all that. The audiences may be able to make their own decisions on the various highlights received by looking at something that already exists.

Conclusion

Zootopia is an animated film that uses animals as its character orientation. There are quite a number of animal characters used in the film, and each character has its own role. Normally, most of the animal characters are well depicted. However, there are three animal characters that have quite different and significant depictions when connected to reality. Those three animal characters are rabbit, mouse, and fox. Hence, *Zootopia* movie is interesting to analyze regarding the focus on the three animal characters. To explore the meaning contained in the three animal characters, the researchers applied Saussure's theory of semiotics. In which, the theory is related to the interpretation of a sign which includes the *signifier* and the *signified*. In the

discussion, the three animal characters were found to have general and specific meanings. In this research, the general meaning is a *signifier* of the meaning of the three animal characters analyzed in general. Meanwhile, the specific meaning is the *signified* of the three animal characters that can be seen by researchers through the analysis. The finding of general and specific meanings is then interpreted. Accordingly, it leads to the results of the analysis which is about the breaking stereotypes that appear in reality through movies related to the three animal characters' existences. In the movie, the three animal characters have roles which are different when compared to their existences in real life.

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