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Southeast Asian Visual Culture In The Animated Film “*Raya And The Last Dragon*”

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In the year of 2020 “*Raya and The Last Dragon*” was launched and became part of the Disney Princess animated series. This animated film is rumored to be Disney's first film created based on Southeast Asian visual culture. This study aims to analyze the visual culture of Southeast Asia portrayed in the animated film *Raya and The Last Dragon*. The research is carried out with qualitative approach, through documentation of previous studies, especially those related to visual culture in Disney Princess animation, as well as direct observation of the film studied. Animated films are a reflection of the thoughts, feelings, and desires of the creators through visual media in the form of signs or semiotics. Therefore, the film *Raya and The Last Dragon* is analyzed using the semiotic analysis method. These data is strengthened by interviews with cultural experts. The results of this study indicate that *Raya and The Last Dragon* displays visual signs in the form of settings, costumes, and tools that are a fusion Southeast Asian culture are observable in characterizations, character visualization, to visualization of promotional media of “*Raya and the Last Dragon*”. However, the visualization is not a genuine representation, and does not properly reflect the visual culture of Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Semiotic, Animation, Character Design, Southeast Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

Disney Studios is an American global film company and producer of many films that are well-known in pop culture. Over the years, Disney has been known for its fairy tale princesses; it is even reflected in the Disney brand logo featuring a castle (Do Rozario, 2004). This image began with the launch of the animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. *Snow White*, which was adapted from German folklore, is the first animated Disney Princess film, an animated series that depicts a female protagonist or a princess as the main character in the story.

Up until 2020, Disney Film Studio has produced 13 animated film titles in the Disney Princess series. Based on the time of release, the thirteen films are divided into several eras; namely Classical, Renaissance, and Post-Renaissance.

Classical Era (1937-1959)

Disney Princess films from the classic era are *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*. The three films are based on European folklore, thus, all the characters in the film come from the Caucasoid race, are visualized as white, and only represent European visual culture.

Renaissance Era (1989-1999)

The Disney Princess renaissance era began in 1989. Films during this era include *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and The Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). The princesses featured in this era are Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas and Mulan. In this era, Disney Princess animated films began to feature non-Caucasoid characters such as Aladdin, Mulan, and Pocahontas, each of which are inspired by Middle Eastern folklore, China, and historical figures of Native Americans. While all three films have come under criticism for their superficial depictions of Middle Eastern and Chinese people and culture, Pocahontas has even been criticized for portraying Native Americans with racist stereotypes that do not authentically reflect their diversity and culture. (Gelman, 2020).

Post Renaissance Era (2009-present)

The post-renaissance era of the Disney film Princess began in 2009; in this era Disney featured more characters from various cultural backgrounds. Films released during this era include: *The Princess and The Frog* (2009) featuring an African-American main character; *Tangled* (2010); *Brave* (2012); *Frozen* (2013); *Moana* (2016), who is raised in Polynesian culture; and *Raya and The Last Dragon* (2020), which is promoted as an animated film based on Southeast Asian culture.

One of Disney's efforts to show cultural diversity is observed in the film *Raya and The Last Dragon*. Set in the imaginary world of Kumandra and inspired by Southeast Asian culture, the animation team of *Raya and The Last Dragon* conducted research in Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore for the production of this film. These efforts show Disney's seriousness in presenting Southeast Asian visual culture values in the plot and visual elements of *Raya and The Last Dragon* (Moon, 2021) This study aims to analyze Southeast Asian visual culture displayed in the animated film "*Raya and The Last Dragon*".

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data in this study is obtained from the film "*Raya and The Last Dragon*" published by Disney film, and can be accessed through the paid application Disney+ Hotstar since May 2021. The method used in this research is a qualitative approach, through documentation from previous studies, especially relating to the representation of visual culture in Disney Princess animation, as well as direct observation of the film studied.

Observations will be made through visual signs in the film "*Raya and The Last Dragon*". Animation as a visual communication design work consists of markers in the form of verbal (language) and non-verbal such as visuals. Therefore, to analyze the film, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and interviews with cultural experts will be used to examine the representation of Southeast Asian visual culture in "*Raya and The Last Dragon*."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Visual Culture Diversity in Pop Culture Products

Animation, film, and cinema are popular culture, which is something widespread and easy to find everywhere and is popularized by the mass media (Parker, 2011). Popular culture products such as films and animations have the power to convey values to the audience, especially urban citizens who live in urban areas and are very easily influenced by popular culture (Dutt, 2014). Therefore, any values represented in popular culture will greatly affect the perspective and mindset of the community. Hence, popular media such as animation, especially those aimed at children, are very important in changing people's perspective and opening people's minds toward cultural diversity.

As discussed in the introduction, one of the criticisms towards classic and renaissance Disney Princess films is the lack of representation of non-Caucasian culture. This can be explained as the effect of and Cultural Discount and Cultural Proximity. (Buonanno, 2008)

Cultural proximity is a major factor in producing popular cultural content in America that fits the needs, familiarity, and identity of consumers. Consumers generally feel happy if they recognize culture, customs, lifestyle, ethnicity, and everything that they consider close and familiar to their daily lives. Consumers in America prefer to consume popular culture products that reflect their own identity. Popular culture products that are rooted in other cultures do not trigger a recognition and identification mechanism, and are considered less attractive to consumers.

Hence, in popular culture products such as Disney animated films, Cultural Discount or reducing the original values of the original culture is done so that the animated works produced are more attractive to consumers. Meanwhile, Cultural Discount is done by implementing a story, which is set in a foreign cultural setting, into the formula for making American films. Foreign cultures are treated as exotic commodities embedded in content that is thick with western culture.

Disney Princess films of the renaissance era are thick with the practice of Cultural Proximity and Cultural Discount. This practice is carried out as a marketing strategy so that the content is more familiar to white people who are the majority consumer demographic in America. Various foreign cultures that appear in Disney films such as Aladdin and Mulan are only used as exotic backgrounds to display content that is full of western values. This can lead to a wrong perception of foreign culture that is used as the background or inspiration for a film.

Since the renaissance era, Disney Princess films began to try to display cultural diversity. This change did not happen overnight, but was a decades-long process of deconstruction that began in 1989 and continued into the early 21st century.

In the post-renaissance era, Disney released *The Princess and The Frog* in (2009). It is set in the African-American community in 1920s New Orleans. "*The Princess and the Frog*" tells the journey of Tiana, a black woman. Although it cannot be separated from criticism, such as the lack of dialogue for female characters in (Figure 1) and shallow efforts in representing African American culture (Murphy, 2019), this film has made history as the first Disney Princess animated film to represent African-American culture and characters. After "*The*

Princess and The Frog” in 2016 Disney released the film “*Moana*”, which was inspired by Polynesian culture. To produce this film, the Disney animation team traveled to Samoa, Fiji, and Tonga (Knights, 2016). Although *Moana*'s film received criticism from Polynesian cultural observers for its inaccurate visual culture, *Moana* also received praise for showing a strong female character with roots in Polynesian culture (Hyland, N., 2020).

Moana also has significant meaning for children of Polynesian descent; through the character of *Moana* they can see their self-image appear in popular culture (Matagi, E., 2016). This shows the importance of the diversity of visual cultures, especially in popular media that are able to reach audiences around the world and provide visibility of the cultures displayed.

Southeast Asian Visual Culture in *Raya and The Last Dragon*

Symbolism is often used in works of art such as films to add complexity and depth. Characters and objects in animated films are objects that are not real, different from films in general. Animation has its own visual language that is different from films (Bratt, 2011). In an animated film, the creator expresses narration and messages using various elements, ranging from plot to visual elements such as characters, settings, props, lighting, angles, and even audio elements such as sound.

Visual culture is an aspect of culture that is expressed in visible forms such as images and designs. So to examine Southeast Asian visual culture in animated films such as “*Raya and The Last Dragon*”, it is necessary to observe the visual elements in the film.

Visual elements in animation usually have meanings as suggested by Roland Barthes, namely the signifier and the signified. Animators are generally aware of the use of signs, codes, and conventions in their work, although some are not. If it was the latter, then some of the symbolism would be a little more difficult to explicate and interpret. Usually the audience only knows the meaning of the film as a whole, but when an animation work is analyzed, there are many denotations, connotations, and myths hidden under its visual appearance.

The science that studies signs, codes, and conventions in an animated work is called semiotics, or semiotic analysis. Semiotic analysis is a way of explaining how audiences interpret codes. Therefore, semiotics is often used to analyze films and to interpret and understand the meanings contained in them. What is important to realize is that the meaning conveyed in the code is not created by the person who created the animation, but rather the pre-existing meaning. The creator of the animation simply takes the signs and applies the pre-existing knowledge to create a visual code that is displayed in the animation.

Raya and The Last Dragon film has a duration of 1 hour 47 minutes. The story begins with *Raya* hearing about the legend of the last dragon from her father *Benja*, the Head of the Heart Tribe. Once upon a time when the evil creature *Drun* ran rampant across the land of *Kumandra* and turned humans into stone, a magical dragon named *Sisu* *Datu* infused dragon powers into gems and used them to stop *Drun*. *Sisu* sacrificed himself in the process; the *Sisu* gem was then guarded by the Heart Tribe for generations. Until one day other tribes tried to steal it. The gem broke into several pieces, and *Drun* was again running rampant throughout *Kumandra*.

Years later, *Raya* goes on a quest to find *Sisu*. On the way, *Raya* is chased by *Namaari*, the daughter of the *Taring* tribe who is also looking for *Sisu*'s power. *Raya* also meets several other supporting characters such as *Boun*, *Tong*, and *Noi*, a “baby pickpocket” who uses his cuteness as a disguise to commit various crimes.

Due to the long duration of the film and the many characters, settings, plots, and visual elements shown in this animation; the research will specifically focus on *Raya* as the main character of the film. This study will analyze the verbal and visual signs on the character of

Raya, which refers to the visual culture of Southeast Asia that the creator wants to convey. The signs that will be analyzed consist of: character design, and visualization of film promotional posters.

Character Design

The characters are holders of the roles (main roles) in the work of fiction that enable events to be weaved into a complete story (Aminuddin (2002:79), whereas characterizations are the characteristic, nature, or trait of the roles in the animated film. Characters and characterizations are a way in which creators of animation work display various meanings in an animated film. Based on the theory of signifiers and signifieds, Southeast Asian visual culture can be interpreted through the characters and characterizations of Raya. Verbal and visual signs that will be studied from the figure of Raya through the depiction or description of the character includes the personality, description, and costumes worn by the character.

Raya is the main female protagonist in this film. The name Raya originates from Malay and Indonesian, which means celebrating or great. Raya is told as the daughter of Benja who is one of five tribal chiefs in Kumandra.

The characters of Raya displays several visual signs that will be discussed and interpreted to analyze the south East Asian culture influence. The visual signs that will be discussed include the depiction and description as well as the costumes worn by the character. Throughout the film, Raya is seen using several visual signs inspired by Southeast Asian visual culture. The first visual sign, as shown in Figure 1, is the weapon used by Raya, namely the Kali, which is the signature weapon of the Philippines' national martial art, Arnis.



Figure 1. Filipino Martial Arts
(Source: Black Belt Magazine & Raya and The Last Dragon)

Aside from *Kali* stick and *Arnis*, Raya also depicted carrying a sword that resembles *Keris*. *Keris* is a stabbing weapon belonging to the dagger group originating from Java, Indonesia. It's typically used in the Indonesian martial arts of *Keris Pencak Silat* as a demonstration of *pencak silat* moves using a *keris* as a demonstration weapon.

Pencak Silat are prominently displayed throughout the scenes in the movie, especially during the fighting scene. Raya is often depicted fighting with *Pencak Silat* movement like rolling, fighting on the ground, jumping, and techniques of capturing or disarming.

Based on the previous discussion, some of the Southeast Asian martial arts depicted in the film are: *Pencak Silat* from Indonesia and *Arnis* from the Philippines. According to Qui Nguyen the scriptwriter for "Raya and The Last Dragon", stated that the fight scenes for the film were choreographed of the fight scenes in this film uses Southeast Asian martial arts as its main reference. The decision to use the two distinct types of martial arts is made to give Raya's character a unique fighting style, but still based on Southeast Asian culture.

However, this fusion can be criticized because it can also result in misrepresentation because each martial arts has its own philosophy. For example, *Pencak silat*, the traditional martial art from Southeast Asia is practiced in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines. Each countries has its own *Pencak Silat* style, which makes it reasonable for the film maker to choose this martial art style to represent Southeast Asia. But, since there are so many styles of *Pencak silat*, every movement in *pencak silat* has a philosophical and spiritual aspect depends on the origin country. If the film maker decide to one particular style and do more in depth research about the style and philosophical meaning, *Pencak Silat* as martial arts can be better represented in the characterizations of Raya. The result would be a deeper and more meaningful representation of *pencak silat* beyond visual display that are shown in the movie.

Another aspect that can be interpreted from the visual appearance of Raya is the costume she wears. In semiotic analysis, the way a person dresses is a set of signs that inform others about that person. The clothes worn by characters in animated films encode the smallest signs about that character.

Throughout the film, Raya is shown wearing two different costumes. The first costume is worn in the first half of the film, when Raya is still young. Raya wears a blue-green shirt and pants that are the color of water. After the story continues into adulthood, Raya wears a shirt, vest, belt, trousers, and boots. She is also sometimes depicted wearing cufflinks and a cloak as well as a straw hat. The first clothes worn by Raya are the typical clothes of the Heart Tribe, which are dominated by the green color of water and carvings in the shape of a water dragon. In the story of *Raya and The Last Dragon*, each tribe in Kumandra wears a different color as a representation of their identity. The Talon tribe wears purple and pink colors, and the Fang tribe wears white, red, and cream colors of the Fang tribe. While the Heart tribe wears green and blue water, which also symbolizes the importance of water as a symbol of the center (heart) of life. Each color represents a part of the dragon's body that is considered a protector who has saved all of Kumandra.

The second costume is worn when Raya was growing up, after the Heart tribe was destroyed by Druun due to Namaari's betrayal. Raya changed the color of her clothes to red, brown, and yellow. Raya's clothes are also more revealing than before, especially with the addition of cuffs and a straw hat.

In semiotics, a sign can represent more than one thing. Therefore, the costumes worn by Raya is studied denotatively and connotatively. Based on Roland Barthes' Semiotics theory, a sign can have denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings (Martadi, 2021). Costumes as visual signs can have denotative meanings, namely signs that show meaning according to what

is captured by the human senses. In the context of denotation, a sign will be interpreted according to the basic description observed. Costumes can also have connotative meanings, hidden figurative meanings that must be interpreted first.

There are some denotative signs that can be seen directly on Raya's costumes. First, the shape of the Raya straw hat, as seen in figure 2, is similar to the iconic conical hat typically worn in Southeast Asian Region. It's so common that the hat had many names throughout the region such as: *do'un* in Cambodia; *caping* in Indonesia; and *nón lá* in Vietnam.



Figure 2. Comparison of Raya's hat with *Nón Lá*
(Source: Raya and The Last Dragon & chinadaily.com.cn)

Next, another denotative sign inspired by Southeast Asian visual culture is the yellow *Sbai* shawl that Raya wears. *Sbai* or *sabai* is a garment or cloth covering the shoulders and chest that has become part of traditional Southeast Asian clothing. Finally Raya is also seen wearing typical Cambodian *sampot* pants. From the three denotative signs, it can be inferred that the creators of *Raya and The Last Dragon* combined various kinds of traditional Southeast Asian clothing into Raya's costume. It can also be concluded that Raya's costumes, as well as martial arts choreography, were deliberately designed so as not to refer to a specific Southeast Asian culture.

This is in accordance with the results of an interview between Juliana Wijaya, President of the Council for Teaching Southeast Asian Languages in the United States, and VOA media (Dwiastono and Iman, 2021). In the interview, Juliana as a language consultant for the film *Raya* stated that the creative team of Disney Studios provided guidelines so that the visual elements that appear in *Raya* animation do not refer to the culture of one Southeast Asian country specifically. In the end, Raya's costumes are a fusion of various traditional Southeast Asian clothing and are not an authentic representation of Southeast Asian visual culture.

On one hand, this decision can be seen as the creator's attempt to represent all cultures in Southeast Asia. However, this decision also resulted in the shallow cultural representation we get from the film. As with martial arts styles, each traditional garment has meaning and significance for the wearer and the culture it represents. By mixing various traditional Southeast Asian clothing in *Raya* costumes, it resulted in the loss of meaning contained in each garment and the culture it represents.

Southeast Asian visual culture are observable directly through the denotative signs in *Raya* as a character. As discussed above, Southeast Asian visual culture are represented in the form of weapons, martial arts style and choreography, and the clothes worn by *Raya*.

Unfortunately, the representation of Southeast Asian visual culture in *Raya* is still limited to signs and denotative meanings that appear on the surface. Although the creator of *Raya* uses Southeast Asian visual culture as main reference to design *Raya* as a character, the creative decision to incorporate various Southeast Asian cultures into characters (Dwiastono and Iman, 2021) resulted in shallow visual appearance and does not help the audience to know the diversity and the richness of culture in Southeast Asia.

Each countries in South East Asia, from Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Burma, etc. separately had diverse customs, art traditions, architecture, music, literature, lifestyle, philosophy, religion, and celebrations that have been practiced since prehistoric times. To simplify those culture and reduced it into mainly denotative sign works against the film creator's goal to represent Southeast Asian visual culture.

Raya and The Last Dragon Film Promotional Poster

Poster is one of the media used to promote a product or service.). There are many versions of the promotional posters for the film *Raya and The Last Dragon*. For the purpose of this research, the discussion will focus on the promotional posters used in Disney + hotstar streaming service (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Raya and The Last Dragon* Promotional Poster
Source: Disney+ Hotstar

To analyze this poster, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory will be used to dissect signs using denotation, connotation and myth systems. In denotation, the codes can be seen through the objects displayed in the poster. The Southeast Asian Visual culture is observable through the denotative meanings in the posters.

As discussed in the character design sub section, *Raya* wears costumes and weapons inspired by various Southeast Asian cultures. In addition to costumes and weapons.

Another denotative sign that displays Southeast Asian culture on the poster also observable through the character of Sisu the dragon. Sisu's appearance is similar to Phaya Nak or the dragon Phaya. Phaya Nak is a mystical creature in the belief of people of Thailand and Laos. Thai people believe that Phaya Nak is a demigod who inhabits the Mekong river and has supernatural powers. This belief is based on the cosmology of Buddhism and Hinduism held by the people of the Isan region (northeast of Thailand). They believe that Phaya Nak is responsible for the unnatural wave phenomenon that occurs in the rivers or lakes around them. This is reflected in the design of Sisu's character in the film poster, which is depicted as long and green and blue in color.

The denotative meaning of Southeast Asian visual culture in this film poster is also observed in the visualization of the logotype of *Raya and The Last Dragon*. The design of the letter "R" in Raya logotype has been modified so that its shape resembles the silhouette of a dragon. The dragon silhouette in the typography of the poster also has similarities with Thai architecture, *nak sadung*. In Thai architecture, *nak sadung* is a form of railing shaped like a dragon *Phaya Nak* (Miles, 2020).

To gather more data on Southeast Asian visual culture on the promotional poster for *Raya and The Last Dragon*, an interview was conducted with an expert, Mr. Agoes Koecing. Agoes Koecing is an Indonesian arts and culture activist as well as an expert and teacher of visual communication design. Based on the visual appearance on the poster, Mr. Agoes considered that the film *Raya and The Last Dragon* seems to use the spirit of Southeast Asian cultures to create a new culture as the basis for the film.

From the visual concept of the poster, it can be seen that there is an influence of Asian history and culture that is then reprocessed to become a visual work that suits the tastes of today's film audiences. Mr. Agoes concluded that *Raya and The Last Dragon* is designed as a popular work that uses Southeast Asian visual culture as its main aesthetic value and is not a work that represents Southeast Asian visual culture as a whole.

The results of the researcher's analysis and interview are in accordance with Disney's concept that designed *Raya and The Last Dragon* as a fantasy genre film (Dwiastono and Iman, 2021). As the name implies, fantasy genre films are set in an imaginary world, or another world that is different from the reality that we know.

Although set in an imaginary world, fantasy genre films are still connected to reality in several ways. Thus the fantasy genre is often regarded as a realm 'beyond the realm of possibility' as stated by Lubomír (Abellán-García Barrio., & Encinas Cantalapiedra, A., 2021).

From the definition of the fantasy genre, it can be concluded that *Raya and The Last Dragon* is a fantasy film set in an imaginary world designed created from amalgamation of various Southeast Asian visual cultures. Kumandra as the setting for the film *Raya and The Last Dragon* is not a real mimesis of Southeast Asia. Hence, the character of Raya does not represent authentic visual culture of Southeast Asia. The visual appearance in the film *Raya and The Last Dragon* is inspired by Southeast Asian culture, but has been reinterpreted by film creators who took visual cultures from several Southeast Asian countries and combined them.

The problem with this reinterpretation, if not careful, creators can lose meaning and the culture that they used as inspiration will end up an empty visual shell with no significance to the real culture. In other words, on the surface, this film looks inspired by various cultural elements from Southeast Asia, but if examined in a deeper level, this film has not been able to communicate the diversity and uniqueness of Southeast Asian culture.

If the creator's goal in creating this movie is to represent Southeast Asian culture through its visual elements, then that will invalidate their goal.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that "*Raya and The Last Dragon*" shows an imaginary world or fictional reality with visual appearance that is similar to various Southeast Asian cultures. However, the Southeast Asian visual culture shown in this film is only limited to signs with denotative meanings. Although every culture displayed has been well researched by involving local cultural experts and every cultural inspiration is placed in the right context. but, amalgamation or merging of various cultures in this film has the potential to obscure the genuineness and philosophical meaning of every culture depicted.

In creating an imaginary world, filmmakers can indeed take references from the real world to be reinterpreted into fictional settings. Even so, filmmakers need to be careful when incorporating diverse local cultures into imaginary settings. The amalgamation of cultures taken without regard to context, philosophy, and meaning has the potential to lead to a Cultural Discount. Cultural discount is a practice of implementing a story, which plays in a foreign cultural setting and creates cultural exoticism with concurrent proximity. (Petschow, A.) The exotic story, setting and characters are doing nothing to promote the culture where the story is originated and does not bring more values or positive recognition to said culture.

Despite these shortcomings, "Raya and The Last Dragon" is a total deconstruction of Disney Princess films in the classical era which was dominated by western hegemony and no cultural diversity. Disney's efforts in displaying visual signs that represent Southeast Asian visual culture can be used as inspiration and empowerment for local creators.

However, it should be remembered that the representation of visual culture in popular media should be more than just the surface, there needs to be an in-depth research on the culture that will be adapted into popular works to find the spirit and meaning of the culture before it is adapted into a new form without losing the context.

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