

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains six parts that will be discussed, namely study background, problem statements, study objectives, originality and significance, study limitations, and operational definition of the key terms.

1.1. Background of the Study

Past to present, now to then, communication is inevitable for the mankind. In order to be able to make sense of their world, humans do communication to decode and encode information (Jakobson in Nöth, 2014, p. 107). In this respect, several communication tools are utilized so humans can grasp and communicate meanings to each other. For example, humans use language as the inseparable tool in verbal communication. Or, humans may use other things for doing nonverbal communication. Although the communication tools mentioned are put differently as “verbal” and “non-verbal”, for some reasons, both of them are actually same in its entity as “signs”.

The discussion of signs is carried out by semiotics. According to semiotics, a sign is meant to represent ‘something else’ aside from its physical form (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). In other words, signs can have such broader and deeper meanings, not only restricted to their explicit occurrence. Besides, signs are various and not confined. To make clear the scopes of signs, thus, Charles S. Peirce groups signs into three models, namely icon, index, and symbol (Hall, 2012, pp. 8-12).

Compared to icon and index, symbol is quite problematic to discuss. That happens since the broader and deeper meanings of symbols are closely related with certain culture. Moreover, Hall (2012) also asserts that particular symbol can be linked to any meanings based on the arbitrary relationship of the two, and it is invented by humans. This means, the study of symbols may result in the main problem where the same symbol can be interpreted differently from one person to another. That is because, culture highly influences one's attitude toward something (Sondheim, 2014). Hence, in order to make people understand the meanings relayed in symbols, such peculiar culture related to the symbols needs to be understood in common.

One of the distinctive cultures that is rich for symbols and generally not known by people is the celebration of *Día de los Muertos*, happens annually in Mexico. The culture is also known as “The Day of the Dead”, a one-whole-day time where all Mexican people do a remembrance for the departed. The culture is well-depicted in *Coco*, an animation movie by Disney Pixar, showing how vibrant the celebration is. During the event of remembering the deceased, unlike the common attitude where people experience morbid feelings toward death, all Mexican people precisely accept death by ‘celebrating’ it with joy and laughter. Such culture may turn out to be odd and immoral for people in common. It is no wonder since generally, death is not something that people can make ‘fun’ of, but it is a phenomenon where people do lament on it instead.

According to Spektor (2018), *Día de los Muertos* is not only an annual event to remember the dead, but it is believed as the most awaited moment

where the dead can ‘visit’ the living. Every November 1st and 2nd, the series of this culture are held. Each family in Mexico are busy to prepare their own arrangement of the compulsory objects used during the event. In fact, the objects are intriguing for its merry and colorful characteristics. Some of the compulsory objects are altars (*ofrendas*), bright orange marigold flowers (*flor de muerto*), bright candles in cemeteries, the colorful tissue paper cut (*papel picado*), decorated skulls (*calavera*), bread of the dead (*pan de muerto*), and photographs of the deceased (Nalewicki, 2019). Based on *Día de los Muertos* perspective, people celebrating the culture believe that the objects mentioned are not just physical things. There is a broader meaning relayed from the objects, that is, as the essential mediums of reminiscence of the dead families.

In semiotics, symbols can be analyzed for its broader and deeper meanings based on its ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ (Saussure in Yakin & Totu, 2014, p. 6). Peirce, again, put the two into three kinds of dimensions, or mostly known as the Trichotomy theory of signs. That is, the ‘signifier’ is a ‘sign vehicle’, while the ‘signified’ is constructed by two elements called ‘sense (meanings)’ and ‘reference’ (Hall, 2012, pp. 28-32). In another discussion, symbols are possibly used in film and commonly known as ‘filmic signs’ or ‘the language of film’ (Peters, 1981, p. 7). That is to say, symbols may possibly be utilized in movie as the means to communicate or deliver particular message to its viewers (Sreekumar, 2015, p. 4).

Thus, in this research, the writer presumes that *Coco* displays several Mexican culture-related symbols to represent such deeper and broader

meanings different from its physical occurrence. Regarding to the belief that Mexican people have in having reminiscence of the dead through particular objects, hence, the writer also intends to analyze and interpret the symbols found in *Coco* as the purposely made signs to emphasize the film's intended message, which is about 'reminiscence'.

By doing this research, the writer expects to have a deeper understanding of Mexican culture-related symbols being featured in *Coco* as well as how the symbols can deliver the movie's intended message of 'reminiscence'. To achieve the goals, the writer will: 1) first, make use of Peirce's Trichotomy theory (Hall, 2012, pp. 28-32); and 2) second, make use of Mise-en-Scène approaches as the 'language of film' theory, which only focuses on setting and figure behavior analysis in a movie (Villarejo, 2007). To strengthen the writer's interpretation in correlating the symbols found with the message of 'reminiscence', thus, other reliable theories are employed: such as, 1) the three practical ways of reminiscence as propounded by Gerfo (1980); along with 2) the approaches to interpret symbols in movie, based on its sources and ways of meanings (Hall, 2012).

The writer chooses *Coco* as the primary research material considering how notable the movie is since it was firstly premiered in 2017. *Coco* has won 67 titles as "Best Animation Movie and Original Song" in 2017 to 2018. Furthermore, *Coco* is typical with the Mexican culture of The Day of the Dead celebration. In depicting the culture, *Coco* displays several objects which are distinctive for its occurrence and meanings. This becomes important to be

discussed, since symbols can occur as objects and they are also meant to deliver such broader meanings different from their physical occurrence.

Moreover, the study of Mexican culture-related symbols in *Coco* can expand its viewers' perspective and enable them to grasp the message of 'reminiscence' that the movie wants to communicate. At last but not the least, *Coco* portrays death as something beautiful through the vibrant atmosphere of *Día de los Muertos*, as well as meaningful through its correlation with the reminiscence of the dead. That turns to deliver an important message which people may want to believe in life; where death is no matter, as long as the reminiscence prevails.

1.2. Problem Statements

According to the study background explained above, the writer composed two research questions to be analyzed further, i.e.:

- 1.2.1. What are the Mexican culture-related symbols displayed in *Coco* and what do they signify?
- 1.2.2. How do certain symbols found in the movie deliver intended message(s) of reminiscence?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

By the end of doing this research, the following goals are expected to be achieved:

- 1.3.1. Identifying the Mexican-culture related symbols displayed in *Coco* and understanding the deeper and broader ideas that they signify.

1.3.2. Finding out how certain symbols found in the movie deliver intended message(s) of reminiscence.

1.4. Originality and Significance

This paper is the writer's original work and made with her best knowledge. Through the library and internet research done by the writer, it has been confirmed that the discussion of Mexican culture-related symbols in *Coco* and its connection with reminiscence message have not been conducted by any other researchers so far. In addition, acknowledgements have been presented to every party assisting the writer in completing this paper.

As for the significance, this study contributes such a new discussion of cultural symbols in the relation with movie's intrinsic elements. Particularly, this study presents how symbols' broader and deeper meanings can be revealed by considering movie's setting and figure behavior analysis.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

Symbols can occur in various kinds of forms. Abrams (1999) states that any kinds of conceivable things can be a symbol. Thus, things which can be perceived visually, audibly, or even tactile, are possible to become a symbol. Besides, to analyze and interpret symbols in a movie, one can use the literary theory of *mise-en-scène*. There are lots of *mise-en-scène* elements, such as setting, lighting, costume, hair, make-up, and figure behavior.

In this study, the writer will only focus on discussing Mexican culture-related symbols and *mise-en-scène* elements to find the message of 'reminiscence' in *Coco*. The symbols will be restricted to visual and audible

things. To be more specific, the visual symbols are only in the form of objects and colors, whereas the audible symbols take form as songs played in *Coco*. Besides, the mise-en-scène elements are limited to setting and figure behavior analysis, which are studied only to help the writer in correlating the symbols with particular message mentioned, not anything else.

1.6. Operational Definition of the Key Terms

To avoid ambiguity and find this study easier to comprehend, some specific terms used are listed and defined as follows.

1. Semiotics

Semiotics is the field of study discussing sign processes used as communication tools in human social life, with respect to nature and culture (Nöth, 2014).

2. Mexican Culture-related Symbols

Symbols being analyzed with respect to *Día de los Muertos* culture in *Coco*.

3. Mise-en-Scène

Any elements in a movie that the audience can perceive, which hold the significant role to impart particular mood to the story or deliver certain characteristics of narrative implied by the movie's director (Sreekumar, 2015).

4. Message

The important idea that is being communicated in a movie and addressed to the audience. In this respect, the message comes from the movie's external source (i.e. director) and is delivered through certain means (i.e. symbols).

5. Reminiscence

The three kinds of reminiscence attempts proposed by Gerfo (1980), namely informative, evaluative, and obsessive reminiscence. To be more precise, informative reminiscence aims to inform, evaluative reminiscence aims to evaluate, whereas obsessive reminiscence aims to stop reminiscing. Particular reminiscence mentioned occurs by different kinds of causes and may result in particular effects influencing one's way of reminiscing something or someone.