

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter, several theories will be elaborated further and used as the reliable sources to help the writer in analyzing and interpreting the data. The writer has put several old studies using *Coco* as the studied material as well. This is to make clear that the writer conducts a new focus study of *Coco* that no other researchers have done so far.

2.1. Theoretical Perspectives

2.1.1. *Día de los Muertos* / The Day of the Dead

Sherman (1992) introduces some highlighted points about *Día de los Muertos* celebration, which is held on every November 1st and 2nd in Mexico. In its origin, the culture of celebrating The Day of the Dead was begun from the native practicing done by the Aztecs. It is the annual holiday where the dead are being commemorated—and it is similar with the Christian solemnity, having the series of events called All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

The Aztecs believed that death was something natural, indeed, a part of life; the continuance of the current life (Specktor, 2018). Instead of considering death as the ending of life, they believed that 'new life' came from death. The culture is so distinctive for its properties and decorations. During the celebration, houses and cemeteries are always full with props and décor.

In fact, *Día de los Muertos* is not only about the event, but the attitude underlying its celebration. People in Mexico who celebrates the culture believes that through the inseparable particular objects used during the event, the dead family members are ‘guided’ to come home and able to ‘meet’ the living again. To be specific, the objects are not only physical things to use, but having the role as the ‘medium’ to ‘connect’ the dead and the living families, so both parties can celebrate the culture ‘together’.

Firstly, there should be an altar in the house. The altar is also mentioned as *ofrenda*, decorated with bright yellow marigold flowers (*flor de muerto*), photographs of the departed, and several offerings such as foods and drinks (Generic Editor, 2017). As how the belief prevails, *ofrenda* are constructed by the four elements of nature, that is earth, wind, fire, and water (Specktor, 2018). The element ‘earth’ is represented by foods, particularly the one called as *pan de muerto* or ‘bread for the dead’. While the element ‘wind’ is represented through the colorful tissue paper cut (*papel picado*), as its fragile structure can easily flew by the wind. Besides, *papel picado* is commonly used to decorate the altar to remind the living about the fragility of life (Ward, n.d.). The next elements, ‘fire’ and ‘water’, are represented with candles and the drinks, put on the altar. Additionally, as how *ofrenda* holds the role as the medium to honor the dead families, their photographs are put on the altar, and some may also put their favorite things or personal belongings (e.g. hats, toys, instruments, etc.).

Secondly, sugar skulls and skeletons are everywhere, as those are the artistic representations of death (Brandes, 1998). That can be seen from its colorful appearance, which is aesthetically pleasing, instead of frightening. In his journal, Brandes mentions nine characteristics of the two, as 1) ephemeral, 2) seasonal, 3) humorous, 4) secular, 5) commercial, and 6) designed for the living. In other words, skulls and skeletons may only exist to enliven The Day of the Dead celebration, instead of being saved as the objects needed to enjoy the moment. That is because the two are iconic for its colorful design as it has no such sacred link with ‘death’—so it can be utilized for the living’s secular and commercial purposes, such as selling sugar skulls candies, skeletons drawings, and more.

Thirdly, the Mexican popular art called *alebrijes*, invented by a Mexican folk named Pedro Linares in the early 19th century (Guerrero, n.d.). It was firstly created in 1930, when Linares had a nightmare of being chased by colorful mystical creatures chanting ‘*alebrije*’. From then, Linares started to make the nightmarish creatures into arts made out of paper pulp. According to NowThis Editor (2018), *alebrijes* are made out of different elements of animals; such as the combination of dragon body, lion teeth, deer antlers, eagle or bat wings, etc. They are painted in vibrant colors, detail patterns, having different kinds of sizes and even face expressions. Hence, one kind of *alebrije* will have no other one that is exactly alike. At present, *alebrijes* are associated with *Día de los Muertos* celebration as the typical decorations used during the event.

Fourthly, apart from its function as decorations on *ofrenda*, marigold flowers and candles hold the role as the 'path' leading the dead to come closer to the altar. The arrangement of marigold flowers and candles are vary in locations, it can be around the *ofrenda*, street outside the house, and so on. Yet, it should be structurally put in line as it forms a path, while the candles may be placed next to the flowers as it gives the light around the path (Strom, 2020). In point of fact, the two objects are important for the dead, believed can help the departed family members to come to the altar by following the flowers' scent, the candles' light, and the path structured by the two.

Fifthly, traditional colors which are mostly seen during *Día de los Muertos*. According to Valverde (2016), some colors such as yellow, purple, black, and white, hold the role to characterize certain values instilled in the tradition. Yellow, represents light as well as the power of life. Purple, signifies the grief, mourning, and pain as it has been used since the 16th century, symbolizing Christian mourning. Black, stands for the existence of death; while in contrast, white stands for innocence and purity of the dead souls. In addition, Baldwin (2017) suggests other colors, that is, pink, red, and orange. Pink represents such vivid atmosphere during The Day of the Dead culture, red signifies the color of blood, whereas orange color featured through marigold flowers evokes the color of sun, believed by the Aztecs to guide the dead souls.

The last thing existing which is no less important is music. During The Day of the Dead celebration, many musicians wander around the graveyard. Not least of people will hire them to play the favorite songs of the departed families (Strom, 2020). Music has become a part of the offerings that the living give to the dead to honor them, as it would also be conducted if the dead were still alive and could celebrate the culture together with the living.

2.1.2. Theories of Semiotics and Symbols

2.1.2.1. The Two Proponents of Semiotics Theories

The term “semiotic” is derived from the Greek *semesion* which stands for “sign” (Yakin & Totu, 2014, p. 4). Principally, a sign consists of signifier (something in material form) and signified (something in abstract basis); yet, there are some approaches of theories employed in the respected field.

In the history of modern semiotic at the end of 19th century, there are two proponents from western countries giving big contributions toward the discussion, namely Ferdinand de Saussure (Swiss linguist) and Charles Sanders Peirce (an American philosopher). The two proposed different kinds of approaches in semiotic as the study of signs (Abrams, 1999, p. 279), explained as follows.

According to Saussure, semiotic is a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. In this case, Saussure

emphasized that language is a sign system which constructs the reality, instead of reflecting it. To put it simply, Saussure proposed the semiotic approach called “dichotomy theory of signs”—where language occurs as the signifier (as sound pattern) constructing the signified (the concept in reality). In this respect, Saussure was more concerned in the discussion of linguistic signs or speech that can trigger the audience to come up with certain concept or mental image in their mind.

In contrast, Peirce proposed the “trichotomy theory of signs”—where a sign consists of three aspects called ‘sign vehicle’, ‘sense’, and ‘reference’. The term ‘sign vehicle’ here is as the same as Saussure’s term of ‘signifier’, which holds the role as the perceivable things represent certain concept. Whereas the terms ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ here are the elements of Saussure’s principle of ‘signified’. In other words, Peirce believed that the existence of a concept may not always have logical relation between signifier and signified (as what Saussure suggested) since it will be influenced by one’s particular sense that may result in different kinds of reference (concept in reality).

Further, Peirce also suggested the three types of signs, namely icon, index, and symbol; which are differentiated by the type of relation existing between the signifier and the signified. Hence, although both Saussure and Peirce are no opponents to each

other's theories, it is still true that Peirce's approaches of semiotic is more complicated compared to Saussure's.

2.1.2.2. The Concept of Symbol as a Sign

As part of sign, hence, a symbol is indeed constructed by two elements, which are 1) signifier and 2) signified. Yakin & Totu (2014) clearly mention that the two are different based on their characteristics. A signifier is something that can be perceived physically and distinguished by human senses; while a signified is something abstract, not existing either literally or physically. Both of the two are the essential parts of symbols which have the role to create such signification between certain signifier and signified.

As previously introduced, Charles Sanders Peirce declares symbol as his third consideration of models that a sign might take. In Hall (2012, pp. 22-32), the term "symbol" is mentioned differently as "reference", to make clear how a symbol works; that is, the way in which a signifier represents its signified.

A symbol can be identified where the signifier and signified are linked to each other because of the arbitrary relationship existing between them. In other words, symbol occurs when certain signifier is linked to certain signified without any reason, except the arbitrary relationship existing between the two. Mostly, the "arbitrary relationship" is indeed influenced by one's

background and culture. Hall (p. 32) provides the examples as, shaking hands (signifier) is having the arbitrary relationship with greetings (signified); or a tie (signifier) which has the arbitrary relationship with formal occasion (signified), and so on.

Abrams (1999) states that in interpreting symbol, the most important resource to consider is social convention. Thus, the study of symbols requires one to know certain convention related with the symbols as well as to give consideration to the semiotics theory of symbol analysis.

2.1.2.3. Semiotic Study and Symbol Analysis

As Umberto Eco argued in Chandler (2007, p. 2), semiotics concerns its study on everything which can be adopted as a sign. It is possible to be in the form of everyday speech, or anything else; which should 'stands for something else', different from its explicit form. Eco also specified other forms of signs, such as images, words, objects, sounds, and gestures.

Hence, as a part of sign, symbols can also be analyzed by using semiotics theories. Particularly for symbols displayed in a movie, Hackley (2009) claims that the analysis of symbols needs to have a deconstruction of meaning in given context. Strictly speaking, audience must avoid the assumption of considering one thing as familiar or usual.

In this case, a symbol related with certain culture can be deconstructed for its original meanings (as how it is believed in the culture), and then be added with the other possible meanings featured in a movie. By doing this, audience can have such broader and deeper inferences of the symbols' meanings in accordance to the relation with particular context happened.

2.1.2.4. Peirce's Trichotomy Theory

Since symbol is one of the signs' models suggested by Peirce, its characteristics can be analyzed from the characteristics of signs in general. In Yakin & Totu (2014), highlighted points of Peirce's sign theory are presented, particularly the Trichotomy theory or three-dimensional system of signs. Peirce proposed that every sign will have its three characteristics, namely 1) sign, 2) object, and 3) interpretant.

Firstly, sign. Signs are tangible, explicitly exist and can be perceived or distinguished by human senses. It can be something visible, audible, or even odorous. For example, certain object as the explicit thing that human can see; song as it is perceived audibly; even the smell of coffee brewing which indicates that there is might a coffee shop nearby. In Hall (2012, p. 22), the term 'sign' is mentioned understandably as 'sign vehicle'. Indeed, sign always use a 'vehicle'—as the same as 'medium'—to convey greater meanings beyond its physical form of appearance.

Secondly, object. Hall (ibid.) argues that the term ‘object’ is simply and solely the ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ of the sign vehicle itself. The meaning can be either concrete or abstract idea. For example, butterfly can represent either its concrete sense as a living organism in nature, or, such abstract idea about the existence of a life cycle—as how butterflies are came from stages in metamorphosis cycle. This holds the true characteristic of signs, where everything can be a sign which stands for something else, as long as one interprets it as it is.

Lastly, interpretant, this refers to one’s perception of inferring sign vehicle as the representation of particular idea, influenced by certain culture which one experiences; or, has been familiar with. Hall (ibid.) suggested the other term for interpretant, mentioned as ‘reference’. For example, one perceives plants as beautiful living things growing in each day. Yet, the other one perceives it differently as helpless living creature which ‘cannot do anything’ every day. To be concluded, the two subjects interpret the same sign vehicle (plants) differently, according to their own kind of reference—in this case, is an abstract idea about plants—influenced by their personal attitude, consideration, and so on. In another example, reference can also be embodied as a tangible thing. For instance, ‘a musical instrument having black and white keys which are played by the fingers’ is the sign vehicle for piano; yet

some may also refer it to keyboard, organ, and so on. Thus, interpretant or reference of signs is deeply influenced by one's interpretation and thought.

Thus, it can be concluded that symbols can be analyzed for its deeper and broader meanings by paying attention to their sign vehicle, sense (meanings), and reference. Additionally, symbols analysis will become more reliable when it is linked with the relevant culture.

2.1.3. Mise-en-Scène in Film

Mise-en-Scène is a cinematic term refers to all elements featured in film, as the same as everything that audience can perceive from the scenes displayed to them (Bordewell & Thompson in Sreekumar, 2015). Broader than just the intrinsic elements of a movie, mise-en-scène theory covers the details of how a movie is constructed. In other words, everything appears and put in the movie's scenes will be the elements covered by mise-en-scène theory. Additionally, mise-en-scène has the function to relay movie's certain idea or messages. Propounded by Villarejo (2007), there are two possible elements that can be analyzed in identifying the whole idea or message of a film.

First, setting. Within setting analysis, it includes both setting as 'location' and 'sound stage'. Setting as location is simply defined as where and how certain scene is featured in a film. It can be viewed physically whether it is on the roadway, in suburb or metropolitan areas,

etc. Moreover, it can also appear ‘implicitly’ through particular situation; for instance, the hustle and bustle atmosphere referring to such Chinatown-kind of place, glamorous or cosmopolitan life style as it is relevant with Paris or any other deluxe sites, etc.

Specifically, the term ‘location’ means settings created based on the depiction of the real world, instead of such imaginary in fictional world. Whereas setting as ‘sound stage’ refers to the purposely made elements, in which the variable of light and sound can simulate any kinds of environments that the movie wants to show to its audience. Thus, ‘sound stage’ of a film will cover the world beyond our reality, which is by no means confined. Since it will give such vague settings, hence, properties are used in helping the audience to clarify a mood or intended message of particular scene. In this case, the properties can be in the form of objects and colors. Both of the two properties are possibly to be identified, to make clear certain idea or message intended in a film.

Second, figure behavior. In film analysis, this element will cover every kinds of actions of the actors or other figures (i.e. animals, animated things, robots, etc.) put in the movie’s scenes. The term ‘action’ can be sharpened into several forms, such as dialogues, movements, certain acts, attitudes, or even cross-dressing appearances. Concisely, figure behavior is interrelated with every single character in a film.

2.1.4. The Concept of Reminiscence

In Meriam-Webster dictionary (Reminiscence, 2020), the word ‘reminiscence’ holds the meaning as either the practical action of thinking or retelling past experiences or one’s memorable experience. In other words, ‘reminiscence’ can be embodied as both active and passive attitude; to share one’s life stories to other people, or, to keep it deep in one’s heart and mind.

Furthermore, Gerfo (1980) states that there are three kinds of practical reminiscence attempts that humans do, namely 1) informative reminiscence, 2) evaluative reminiscence, and 3) obsessive reminiscence. Informative reminiscence is the process of recollecting ‘factual material’ of one’s life stories. It has the purpose to review one’s actual ‘life path’, regardless it is a good or bad one. In doing an informative reminiscence, one expects itself to either: 1) experience pleasant feeling toward the reminiscence of such memorable moment; or 2) enhance its self-esteem by thinking back to the moment that they wish to forget. Although informative reminiscence seems to ‘evaluate’ one’s life journey, yet, it is not purposed to judge one’s personality or its life history.

Whereas evaluative reminiscence occurs because of one’s old guilty feelings and conflicts. One does this kind of reminiscence to find meaning in its accomplishments in life. Through this reminiscence process, one expects itself to attain such well-developed character. That is, the moment by one experiences ‘ego integrity’: a feeling to accept

one's journey of life as something inevitable and for some reason, believing that it is 'right' for its own existence. Yet, for the ones who have such strong ego and feel uneasy to accept particular past event happened, they will more likely to re-evaluate the event and possibly to come up with particular judgment in order to find reasons why the event must be accepted.

Lastly, obsessive reminiscence may result from one's stress, mourning, or guilt which possibly causes one to not be able to accept its past and come to dysfunctional stage of reminiscence. Stress can cause one to stop reminiscing anymore, as it is a defense to avoid any other possibilities of stress intruding to one's mind. Whereas mourning, may lead one to experience prolonged pain because of keeping mourning recollections for long time. Yet, it does not give one a pleasant feeling, nor enhancing one's self-esteem, but leads one to find itself 'stuck' in the past grief and find no 'replacement' for the one that has been gone. Consequently, one may feel abandoned, and possibly to experience guilt over the anger of being abandoned. That guilt may result in one's decision to resist any kinds of inputs, since one feel unworthy to recuperate itself and it becomes a rejection or betrayal of the former event happened. In this case, sense of physical touch, sounds, smell, and visual memory are useful to be employed so one's reminiscence can slowly be recovered and will not burden and hurt itself anymore.

2.1.5. Interpreting Symbols' Intended Message in Film

Hall (2012) suggests some useful approaches to help humans understand what message is relied on particular symbols. There are two scopes of meanings, that is 1) sources and 2) ways.

First, sources of meanings. As how symbols are inseparable from semiotics and human beings, Hall emphasizes the two kinds of sources which can be well-perceived by humans, namely cultural and natural sources. Cultural sources refer to the something considered as symbols by certain group of people, because of the social convention that they have been familiar with. In this case, the symbols' message is invented by human beings, based on particular culture existing in their world. Thus, if a symbol occurs from cultural sources, its meaning or message behind its physical appearance can automatically be interpreted; as long as one is having such thorough comprehension of certain culture related with the symbol itself. While natural sources refer to symbols which occur as something having a natural aspect to its form (i.e. animals, plants, or nature elements, etc.). Indeed, symbols which come from natural sources will have natural meanings to us as human beings, which is likely to be 'true' and no need to be argued. Natural sources symbols indicate that their meanings are not invented by humans, but discovered naturally.

Second, ways of meanings. This is the method of relaying message that a symbol embodies. To make it clear, there are three kinds of ways of relaying symbols' meanings, which are 1) literal, 2) analogical, and 3)

metaphorical. If it is literally, symbols' meanings may be conveyed explicitly through narratives, such as sentences (i.e. dialogues) and written things (i.e. movie script). If it is analogically, symbols' meanings are based on the likenesses between certain signifier and signified. To put it simply, it has the relation of 'one thing is like another'. For example, the appearance of a dark rain clouds may has the likenesses to depict gloomy feelings, sadden atmosphere; or in contrast, the colorful rainbow is like the philosophy of how 'colorful' this life is, and so on. Lastly, if it is metaphorically, symbols' meanings are deeply rooted to certain social convention, or contextually related to one's experience. For example, the national flag of Indonesia is a symbol which its meanings are relayed metaphorically. That is because, the flag relays different meanings to certain group of people. For general people, the flag is only a symbolic thing for a country's independence; but for Indonesian people, it symbolizes more than that—which will refer to the long journey of how Indonesia can obtain its independence, free from Japan and Dutch colonialism, and so on.

2.2. Recent Studies

Since the first-time released in 2017, *Coco* has been very popular to be analyzed for its intrinsic elements, particularly plot, settings, and characterization. For that reason, some researchers have already conducted the study of analyzing motifs, distinctive Mexican culture, and characters' values featured in *Coco*.

Du (2018) analyzed how the entire storyline of *Coco* realizes the functions to entertain, educate, and publish positive and universal values to its audience. Du utilized certain characters' behavior and spiritual phenomenon (e.g. life, death, love, etc.) happened in the movie. Du found that *Coco*'s storyline is actually meant to present the motifs of kinship and dream, death, mythical, animal, and trauma. As a result, Du concluded that the motifs mentioned are used as the tools to create such well narrative structure and touching story. In this respect, Du's study shows how *Coco* features strong formula of plot and theme to its audience.

Aside from that, Nieuwboer (2019) researched whether Mexican culture in animations films for children is represented in positive or negative manner. She analyzed two kinds of works, namely *Coco* (2017) by Disney Pixar and *The Book of Life* (2014) by Reel FX Creative Studios. The approaches that she analyzed are language and visual markers of culture, as well as the primary audience of the films. In the result, Nieuwboer concluded that both films present Mexican culture in positive manner, yet the two approached it differently because of the different targeted audience. This study indicates that Mexican culture featured in animations movies mentioned have no harm for its audience, even for children.

As *Coco* was an appealing animation movie to children, corresponding to Indonesian government's concern of film and character education, Nainggolan (2019) conducted a research of characters education values presented in *Coco*. In the research, Nainggolan analyzed words or sayings from particular

characters and matched it with the “18 values developed in character education” criteria suggested by Syarbini (2012:25) in *Buku Pintar Pendidikan Karakter*. In the findings, Nainggolan concluded that out of the 18 values, *Coco* presents 13 character education values, and only 5 of them are having no evidence in the movie. This concludes that through its characters and characterization, *Coco* is not only presenting its attractiveness as a movie but also giving adequate educational character values that children can emulate it early on.

This research will be discussing about Mexican culture-related symbols in *Coco* as well as its purpose to deliver the movie’s intended message of ‘reminiscence’. That is a new focus study of *Coco* that no other researchers have done so far. Later, the result of this research will become a new claim of how *Coco* is not only worth-studying for its motifs, Mexican culture, and character education values; but *Coco* is a typical movie displaying symbols throughout its scenes with purpose to deliver the intended message of ‘reminiscence’.