

Making Meaning of Inanimate Objects as Characters in *The Blue Umbrella* (2013)

(Memaknai Benda Mati Sebagai Karakter dalam *The Blue Umbrella* (2013))

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap makna yang lebih dalam dan berbeda dari sebuah benda mati, khususnya payung, dari sudut pandang mata telanjang dalam film *The Blue Umbrella*. Film *The Blue Umbrella*, sebuah film pendek animasi yang disutradarai oleh Saschka Unsled, menggunakan benda mati sebagai karakter-karakternya sebagaimana dapat dilihat dari ekspresi wajah yang tergambar di payung berwarna hitam, biru, dan merah. Untuk mencapai tujuan penelitian ini, metode kualitatif digunakan bersama dengan teori semiotika Saussure. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa payung hitam menandakan mayoritas, sedangkan payung biru dan merah menandakan minoritas. Payung hitam juga menandakan kelompok pekerja kantoran serta anggota dari kelompok Mayoritas Seksual dan Gender. Di sisi lain, payung biru dan merah menandakan anggota kelompok Minoritas Seksual dan Gender. Singkatnya, film ini menyoroti pesan yang menggembirakan bahwa bukan menjadi masalah untuk menjadi berbeda dari pilihan mayoritas.

Kata kunci: benda mati, Saussure, semiotik, tanda, *The Blue Umbrella*

Abstract

This study aims to reveal deeper and different meaning of an inanimate object, specifically umbrella, from naked eye's perspective in *The Blue Umbrella* Film. *The Blue Umbrella* Film, an animated short film directed by Saschka Unsled, employs inanimate objects as the characters as seen through the distinct human's facial expression painted on the black, blue, and red umbrellas To pursue the aim of this study, qualitative method was conducted together with Saussure's semiotic theory. The results showed that the black umbrellas signified as the majorities, while the blue and red umbrellas signified as the minorities. The black umbrellas also signified as a group of office workers as well as members of Sexual and Gender Majority. On the other hand, the blue and the red umbrellas signified as the members of Sexual and Gender Minority. In short, the movie highlights an encouraging message that it is okay to be



different from the majority's choice.

Keywords: inanimate object, Saussure, semiotics, sign, *The Blue Umbrella*

INTRODUCTION

Through the magic of animated films, inanimate objects are often turned into living beings complete with faces, thoughts, and feelings. Just as animals in fable narrations are turned to be the main characters to avoid sensitive and difficult topics; inanimate objects are employed in fiction to serve a similar function. Although some may argue that, unlike animals that are animate objects, inanimate objects as characters in fiction are judged to be less emotionally engaging (Trompenaars 2022). Fowler (1977) further states the cause that animate beings are capable of initiating actions and change, whereas inanimate beings lack this faculty of responsibility. As inanimate objects as characters are dubbed to be less emotionally engaging, the most mainstream media for narratives with inanimate objects as their protagonists is a short films. One of the examples is *The Blue Umbrella* (2013) directed by Saschka Unseld. This six-minute long short movie narrates a story about two umbrellas, blue and red, which fall in love amidst heavy rain on one gloomy night. While previously stated as less emotionally engaging, *The Blue Umbrella* still manages to wrap the story neatly and serve the audiences more than what meets the eye.

To reveal what's more than meets the eye, this current study employs a semiotic theory. According to Eco (1979), semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. The semiotic theory is seen to be able to help the audiences to relate and empathize with inanimate characters for Ferdinand de Saussure dubs that language does not reflect reality but rather constructs it because we do not only use language or give anything that exists in the world of reality, but also to anything that does not exist in it (Chandler 2001). Specifically, this current study employs Saussure's sign system as a theory. Saussure's sign system consists of two focal components, namely signifier which is something that is in a material form, physical and able to be distinguished by human senses (the sound pattern, marker, sound image), and signified which is something that physically does not exist and is in the abstract state (the outcome/the interpretation/conception of the signifier) (Yakin & Totu 2014). However, Saussure further dubs that a sign is something delivered with a purpose and intention; hence, not all things in the human's life can be considered as signs; in other words, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign. Thus, literary text such as *The Blue Umbrella* short film is fit to be interpreted by Saussure's sign system since literary texts are never made without meaning to convey.

Therefore, this current study aims to reveal the semiotic meaning of the inanimate characters, the black, blue and red umbrellas, in *The Blue Umbrella*. On that account, the blue and red umbrellas in the short film are considered as signs that can be studied by its signifier to find out its signified concept beyond the literal meaning. Moreover, literary texts with unconventional characters can be not only perceived as entertaining but also full of meanings. Making meanings out of literary texts using semiotic theory has been done in dozens of remarkable previous studies such as Haris, Agustina, & Trisnawati (2021) "Saussure Semiotic of Animals in *Zootopia* (2016)" that discuss the animal characters as signs, Ahmadgoli & Yazdanjoo (2019) "Multimodal Representation of Social Discourses in Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*: a Social Semiotic Study" which dissects the social and cultural values are presented throughout the film, Dhananjaya, Wandia, & Maharani (2019) "Verbal and Non-Verbal Signs of "Moana Movie

Poster” that identifies and explains the verbal and non-verbal signs in the movie poster, and lastly Noad & Barton (2018) “Emotion Resonance and Divergence: a Semiotic Analysis of Music and Sound in *The Lost Thing* an Animated Short Film and *Elizabeth* a Film Trailer” that contemplates on the impact of music and voice sound on interpretations of film narrative meanings. The previous studies listed above are shreds of evidence to add to the discourse of “literary texts are beyond entertaining purposes.” Therefore, this current study also wishes to add a fruitful addition to the discourse while utilizing Saussure’s sign system in digging deeper into the object, that short film with inanimate characters is engaging and has more meaning than what meets the eye.

METHOD

Thus, this present study employs Saussure’s stream of semiotics, specifically the sign system. Saussure’s semiotics theory is used to support the data analysis extracted from the short movie. This current study practices a semiotic approach to reveal the signified and signifier of the inanimate characters in *The Blue Umbrella* (2013) short film, consequently seeing the inanimate characters as signs. To conduct the research, this current study utilizes a qualitative method by collecting the data through a series of processes namely watching and reviewing, hence the meanings or understandings become the findings within this current study (Merriam & Tisdell 2017). Furthermore, a qualitative method is selected because Creswell (2017) stated that qualitative analysis is an interpretation of the data or simply making meaning from the data. In analyzing the data, this current study uses miscellanea of information that has been gathered from various existing sources, namely books and studies about semiotic theory, mainly Ferdinand de Saussure’s collection.

There are several steps to identify the signifier and the signified of the inanimate characters in *The Blue Umbrella*. The first step is watching and re-watching the short movie to comprehend the whole story. The second step is note-taking on which certain part of the movie is fit to be added to the data inventory. The third step is focusing on the selected data to be analyzed. The final step is reducing unnecessary data which are not needed to strengthen this study.

After the necessary data is collected, this current study is focusing on how the black umbrellas dominate in number and unison may signify being the majority, whilst the blue and the red umbrellas that stand out in the crowd by being different may signify as being the minority and the signifier and signified system used on this current study is based on Saussure semiotic theory. Finally, the conclusion is provided by concluding the results of the data based on analysis and interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses how this current study finds two elements from the inanimate object characters of *The Blue Umbrella* that are going to be analyzed by Saussure’s semiotics the sign system. Those elements are how the black umbrellas signify as the majority and the blue and red umbrellas signify as the minority. Both elements are specifically going to be analyzed by the semiotics of their colors. Consequently there are two sub discussions in this part such as Black Umbrellas: The Majority, and Blue & Red Umbrellas: The Minority.

Black Umbrellas: The Majority

As the main focus of this short film, the umbrellas are ought to be discussed thoroughly starting off with the black umbrellas. If seen through its literal meaning, an umbrella is a folding canopy supported by wooden or metal ribs that are usually mounted on a wooden, metal, or plastic

pole. The term umbrella evolved from the Latin *umbra*, meaning “shaded” or “shadow,” thus the general usage of an umbrella is to shield someone from the rain or the sun (Merriam-Webster 2022). While the modern use of an umbrella focuses solely on its functionality as a portable shade, many other purposes for an umbrella existed. During classical Greece, the umbrella became an indispensable accessory to a lady of fashion in the late 5th century BC (Miller 1992). Aristophanes in one of his plays, *Thesmophoriazousae*, mentioned that it is among the common articles of female use. (Barret & David 1964). Differing drastically from its earlier function as a fashion item, an umbrella can be proposed as a weapon as well. As the incident records in 1978, a Bulgarian writer, Georgi Markov was killed in London by a poisonous material injected via a modified umbrella that was later believed by KGB to have been developed in order to deliver a deadly pellet (Marsden 2008). In the light of a more familiar field, an umbrella appears in many forms of arts and entertainment. Namely in Britain’s famous magical fictional nanny, Mary Poppins, who uses an umbrella to sling down from the sky. Furthermore, in the film *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2015) where the characters, Harry Hart and Eggsy Unwin use a high-tech bullet-resistant umbrella as a weapon. From its main function as a shade to its remarkable statement as a fashion item and weapon, and its featurette in many literary works; there are plenty of ways to define an umbrella.

It is not a strange view to see an umbrella being corporated into literary works. However, the role of an umbrella is only as far as being the prop, not as the actual characters that lead the story or movie. In *The Blue Umbrella* short film, the movie focuses on the umbrellas that frequent the scenes just like in around the opening of the short film, where a bunch of black umbrellas are being opened at the same time under the gloomy, rainy, hustling city. Around the city, too, parts of building such as the water pipe, the manhole cover, the traffic lights, and the street lights are coming alive. What makes the umbrellas special though is the way the parasol parts are all painted with evident human’s facial expressions while also being carried by actual men whose faces are covered by the parasol. In this case, seeing it through the lens of Saussure’s sign system, the umbrellas as a signifier function solely as a shield from the rain or sun without having animated and alive human’s facial expressions, however in the short film the umbrellas signify that the feelings that human carries, although covered or shielded, could show in some way or another because the umbrellas in the movie are showing facial expressions instead of the humans that carry them. This is in line with Saussure’s theory of sign that gives more emphasis to the internal structure, to the cognitive thought process in structuring the physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs of the environments or surroundings (Yakin & Totu 2014). In this case, the umbrellas in the short film are part of the signs found in the environments or surroundings and the painted faces on the parasol of every umbrella are the result of the thought process upon structuring the abstract of the signs that are found in the environments or surroundings.

Moving on, the way that the black umbrellas are moving in unison and all display similar facial expressions of lethargy and depression can signify as being the majority. The majority term here being used is “simple majority” to emphasize on its comparison of plurality and to contrasts it with other majority terms (Schemers & Blokker 2011). The black umbrellas are signified as the majority because they win in numbers compared to the only other two umbrellas, which are the blue and red umbrellas. Not only it is heavily supported by the comparison of colors, the blue and the red umbrellas are painted with different facial expressions which will be elaborated in the next subchapter shortly. Therefore, the black umbrellas signified as a majority can be analyzed through the semiotics of its color. Color semiotics determines the meaning imparted by the sensation that an observer experiences when they look at the color of such sign (Der

Meulen 2019). In this case, the color is black. In psychologically and emotional symbolism, the color black signifies as death, ominous forces, emptiness and depression (Morton 1997). The meanings extracted from color black are fitting with the faces that are painted on the black umbrellas in the short movie, showing lethargy and apathy. Moreover, in the subtractive color theory, the color black is the result of the combination of all colors (Morton 1997) and specifically, RYB (red-yellow-blue) is also considered as subtractive color model (Gage 1995). The subtractive color theory and the RYB model are making it as such the blue and the red umbrellas, although different, are still a part of the black umbrellas. Furthermore, it emphasizes that in a big group of people, there's nothing such as absolute uniformity. There are always one or two entities that are different; nonetheless they are still part of the group. Thus, by analyzing the color semiotics further with Saussure's semiotics, it can be said that the signifier are a bunch of black umbrellas surrounding blue and red umbrellas as the physical entities in the movie, and the signified is that in a group of majority (the black umbrellas) there will always be a few of minorities (the blue and red umbrellas).

Blue & Red Umbrellas: The Minority

This subchapter will be analyzing the blue and the red umbrellas in *The Blue Umbrella* short film. As mentioned in the previous subchapter, the blue and the red umbrellas stand out as primary colored umbrellas in the middle of dozen black umbrellas. Same as the black umbrellas, the blue and red umbrellas are also being carried by humans whose faces are shaded by the umbrellas yet the parasol of the two umbrellas are painted by evident human facial expressions. Starting from the blue umbrella as the main character of this short film, when it shows up, it displays a bright smiley face and is looking blissed when the rain touches it face. In this case, the color and the face expressions the blue umbrella has can already be signified as it being the minority amongst the majority (the black umbrellas). Moreover, adding to its differentness, the blue umbrella displays contradictive facial expressions from its color. From the semiotic of its color, psychologically the color blue symbolizes coolness and cold, introversion, and melancholy (Morton 1997). However, the blue umbrella's bright, friendly, and optimistic facial expressions are contradictive from the usual meaning that the color blue gives unlike the unison, black umbrellas that are displaying depressed and lethargy facial expressions fitting to its color meaning. Thus, the contradictory of the blue umbrella's facial expressions and color meaning add to the blue umbrella's sense of differentness, which makes it signifies as the minority different from the majority. As the sign system of Saussure have a very close relationship that complement each other, the signifier and the signified cannot be separated in a sense that one aspect cannot exist without the existence of the other (Chandler 2001), it is important to note that as a signifier the blue umbrella amongst dozens of black umbrellas may only be physically seen as a different colored umbrella in the middle of uniform colored umbrellas without any deeper meaning to it. However, in the short film, after the blue umbrella is analyzed with Saussure's sign system and through the semiotics of its color; as a signified, the state of being different holds a deeper meaning than what of the signifier.

Moving on to the red umbrella, in the short film its role is portrayed as the blue umbrella's partner. Just like the blue umbrella, the red umbrella also stands out as a primary colored umbrella that displays a different facial expression from the rest of the black umbrellas. Saussure argued that a sign also possesses an arbitrary characteristic which means that a sign can be produce a variety of different meanings depending on different interpretations (Chandler 2001). Thus, the prior meanings of red umbrella exist according to its varied elements that affect the meaning as well. Umbrella as a whole symbolizes the canopy of heavens, shelter, and protection (Protas, Brown, & Smith 1997; Jaffe 2001). While specifically, the red umbrellas

often symbolizes as a good omen, a protection from threats from above. The existing signified meaning of the red umbrella as a good omen is fitting for as it is shown in the later minutes of the short movie, the red umbrella is sheltering a worn-out blue umbrella after having thrown around by the harsh wind. Looking from the color semiotics of red, the color red psychologically symbolizes passion and love (Morton 1997). This is once again fitting to the red umbrella's role in the short film. The existing signified meanings of the red umbrella including its semiotic of color thus far still fit the role it plays in the short film, as the partner of the blue umbrella. However, looking at the gendered portrayal based on the color, the color red is usually associated with instruments of male characters as red may be used to signify speed and danger, representing risk-taking behaviors associated with masculinity. Further example of the color red being associated with male character is in *Thomas and Friends Story Time Collection* (Awdry 2014) which featured almost all male characters that are colored red, blue, and green. (Berry & Wilkins 2017). At a first glance, the color red in the red umbrella of *The Blue Umbrella* short film signifies a different meaning from other existing meanings and associations of the color red since the red umbrella is looking at it gender-wise, portrayed as a female from the way its facial features are drawn: slender eyes and long lashes.

However, in a world where gender's convention is getting wider and wider each day, slender and feminine features are no longer solely associated with feminine characteristics. This further emphasizes that the color red in the red umbrella is flexible in meaning; and since umbrella is technically an object, it has no gender signifier. Interestingly, one of the arbitrary meanings of the color red is passion, which further signifies as passionate feelings. Passionate feelings may vary from violence and anger to love, In this case, the passionate feeling that is signified by the color red of the red umbrella is most likely love. Thus, seen from how the color meaning of blue and red are usually associated with masculinity traits, but then the red umbrella is given facial features that are quite the opposite of masculinity signifies that this romantic, passionate feeling of the two umbrellas may represent a queer relationship. which further clarifies its resemblance to the real world's queer community who is a minority within a majority. It has been mentioned that an umbrella as a sign, is just an object without any gender. However, through the identification of their signified meaning in this short film, the red and blue umbrellas signify a queer relationship. The red umbrella's gender signifier is rather ambiguous, because the red color is associated with masculinity, however the facial features that are drawn in the parasol are feminine. This finding is in line with what Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis (1999) explained about the queer term. It is not meant as a signifier that exactly or solely represents gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered identities. Rather it functions as a marker representing interpretive work that refuses the heterosexual bribe; that is, the cultural rewards afforded those whose public performances of self are contained within that narrow band of behaviors considered proper to a heterosexual identity. Blackburn & Buckley (2005) also adds that queerness is something that mostly works against the oppression that comes with being named, labeled, and tagged. Thus, it is safe to say that the relationship portrayed by the blue and the red umbrellas are a queer relationship.

Taking from the collection of the arbitrary meanings of umbrella, the color red, and the whole red umbrella as a signifier; the red umbrella in *The Blue Umbrella* short film signifies a meaning of being different, from the contradictive meaning compared to its existing arbitrary meanings. Thus, making it signifies as the minority as well. As a pair, the blue and the red umbrellas signify as the minority. Need to be noted that the minority term being used is refer to the Oxford Languages' definition of a minority which is the smaller number or part, especially a number that is less than half the whole number instead of what Healey, Stepnick, and O'Brien

(2019) described of a group of people whose practices, race, religion, ethnicity; or other characteristics are fewer in numbers than the main group of those classifications whose otherwise may experience relative disadvantages. To be precise, the minority in here can be said as the Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGM) because in the previous part of the discussion, it has been identified that the relationship between the red and the blue umbrella signifies a queer relationship. A Sexual and Gender Minority is a group whose sexual identity, orientation, or practices differ from the majority of the surrounding society (Sullivan 2013; Kann, *et al.* 2016). The portrayal of “surrounding society” in this short-film is clearly visible from the way the blue and the red umbrella are surrounded by the black umbrellas that signify as the majority. The minority term being used in this current study for analyzing the semiotics of the inanimate characters does not concern with discrimination or oppression, because even the signified queer relationship is portrayed in a positive light of a media representation.

As mentioned earlier, the umbrellas in this short film are being carried by humans even though they do not directly show their face, thus the facial expressions are instead being shown on the umbrellas. In the beginning of the short film, there are scenes showing the feet of the humans that are carrying the umbrellas and under the uniform black umbrellas that shows a depressed and lethargic facial expressions are feet wearing formal shoes, the formal shoes that are usually wore by office workers. However, when the feet of the human carrying the blue and red umbrellas are shown, they both wear matching rain boots to the color of their umbrellas. Thus, from this it can be signified that the black, depressed, lethargic of the black umbrellas are a majority of office workers and the happy, vivid and energetic blue and red umbrellas are the minority. According to Better Health Channel (2012), work stresses that are often experienced by office workers can have negative impacts on health, both physically and mentally. The physical symptoms include fatigue and the psychological symptoms include depression, discouragement, and irritability. All which are evidently portrayed on the facial expressions of the black umbrellas. The black umbrellas look very detached from emotions, moving in unison without following their own hearts can be a demonstration of emotional inhibition or “bottling up” of emotions. Prolonged work stress can result in an anxiety disorder. In Baker, *et al.* (2004) paper about emotional processing and coping, a group of anxiety patients are very skillful in controlling their emotional experiences, by smothering or bottling up feelings. However, in the case of the black umbrellas; the human's repressed emotions are conveyed through the expressions of the black umbrellas. It could signify that no matter how hard people try to repress their emotions, at one point, it will eventually show. This is in line with how the umbrellas, with their facial expressions, signify as the emotions outlet of the humans whose faces are covered.

Furthermore, Better Health Channel (2012) also adds one of the behavioral symptoms of work stress include disinterest and problems with interpersonal relationship; meaning that, office workers under great burden and stress may unable to feel excitement as easily as others would, and this can include the feeling of excitement from falling in love. On the other hand, the excitement of falling in love is felt by the blue umbrella. The feeling of falling in love also makes the blue umbrella sacrifices moving in the same direction as the other black umbrellas as it is shown in the scene, being carried away and thrown around by the wind to find the red umbrella. Interestingly, the color red can also symbolize as sacrifice (Morton 1997). Thus, the blue and the red umbrellas are signified as escaping the majority fence and are sacrificing what may matters more to others (in this case, it is work or the social conforming heteronormativity) to fall in love; making them even more distinctly different from the rest of the gloomy black umbrellas.

CONCLUSION

Through the findings of the Saussure's semiotic in *The Blue Umbrella*, this current study reveals that the inanimate objects utilized as characters in the short film portray different meaning from the reality. Using Saussure's sign system, it is revealed that the black umbrellas moving in unison signify as the majority and the blue and red umbrellas are signified as the minority for being the different ones. The black umbrellas, although are signified as the majority, are portrayed as gloomy and depressing. Meanwhile, the blue and the red umbrellas are portrayed to be expressing various emotions and more dynamic in movement albeit being signified as the minority. Furthermore, the black umbrellas can be signified as a majority of office workers or members of Sexual and Gender Majority. The red and blue umbrellas, on the other hand, can be signified as the members of Sexual and Gender Minority. The contrast lands the conclusion that the movie gives an encouraging message that it is okay to be different from the majority.

From the findings, it can be determined that the deeper meanings extracted from the inanimate objects as characters serve as a statement that a literary text that employs inanimate objects as characters can convey emotion and essence as well as literary text that employs animate objects as characters. However, of course, taking the arbitrariness of a semiotic theory, the signified meanings found in this current study do not necessarily replace the existing meaning of the same signifier. Thus, not all black, blue, and red umbrellas hold the same meaning as the one elaborated in this current study. The signified meaning of black, blue, and red umbrellas as a result of this analysis is something that is delivered with a purpose and specific intention. Furthermore, seeing as the umbrellas in this analysis are extracted from a short film's characters, it is only natural to interpret it further since every literary text exists to convey a meaning.

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