

Representation Of Imbalance And Restoration In The Lion King: An Analysis Of Tzvetan Todorov's Narrative Structure And Roland Barthes' Semiotics

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Abstract

The Lion King has been widely analyzed through narrative, moral, and semiotic perspectives; however, most previous studies examine either the film's plot structure or its symbolic elements separately. Limited attention has been given to the relationship between narrative progression and symbolic representation in constructing ideological meanings. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how Disney's The Lion King (1994) portrays leadership, responsibility, and social order through the integration of narrative and semiotic dimensions. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, this study uses Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory and Roland Barthes' semiotic framework as complementary analytical tools. The data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, visual symbols, and narrative events obtained from the film. Data were collected through repeated viewing, documentation, and scene classification based on Todorov's five narrative stages, followed by semiotic interpretation at the denotative, connotative, and mythological levels. The findings reveal that the transition from disequilibrium to restoration is not merely a narrative process but also a symbolic journey that redefines legitimate leadership. Key symbols, including Pride Rock, the Circle of Life, and the environmental transformation of the Pride Lands, function as visual representations of authority, accountability, and communal harmony. The study further demonstrates that leadership in the film is constructed as an ethical responsibility achieved through self-recognition and social restoration rather than inherited privilege alone. By integrating narrative and semiotic analyses, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding of how animated films communicate ideological values and contributes a novel perspective to existing studies on The Lion King.



Keywords: Narrative Analysis, Semiotics, Todorov, Barthes, Leadership, The Lion King

INTRODUCTION

Film is a mass communication medium that serves not only as entertainment but also as a means of conveying values, ideologies, and socio-cultural representations to audiences. Through visual, narrative, and symbolic elements, films are able to construct complex meanings and influence audiences' perspectives on social reality. Films can be understood as cultural texts that can be analyzed through scientific approaches, particularly narrative and semiotic studies. The Lion King is an interesting object of study because it contains a strong narrative structure and visual symbols that represent the values of leadership, morality, and the balance of life. The film not only tells the journey of the main character, Simba, but also depicts the dynamics of power, the breakdown of social order, and the process of recovery that occurs within an ecosystem of the animal kingdom. The shift from harmony to chaos and back to balance makes this film relevant for analysis using narrative theory.

Narrative structure consists of five main stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, attempt to repair, and new equilibrium. Todorov explains that "narrative always involves a movement from one state of equilibrium to another, through disruption and restoration" (Todorov, 1977). This concept suggests that every story essentially depicts changing conditions that lead to recovery or new transformation. Meaning in film can also be analyzed through a semiotic approach. Roland Barthes (1972) argued that signs in media have layers of meaning consisting of denotation, connotation, and myth. Myth is a type of speech that functions to construct ideology in society (Barthes, 1972). Visual symbols in film are not only literal but also convey deeper ideological messages.

This phenomenon is also evident in The Lion King, where symbols such as Pride Rock, the Circle of Life, and the changing conditions of the Pride Lands not only function as story elements but also represent moral and social concepts of ideal leadership. Film has the ability to shape the audience's understanding of certain values through narrative and symbolic construction. Previous research has shown that animated films are often used as a medium to convey moral messages and social criticism. Wijaya and Firmanto (2021) noted that Barthes's semiotic approach can uncover hidden meanings in visual media representations. The simultaneous use of narrative and semiotic approaches in this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how films construct representations of imbalance and restoration. This research is crucial for analyzing how narrative structures and sign systems in films work simultaneously to shape ideological meaning, particularly regarding leadership, moral





responsibility, and social balance in society.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a narrative and semiotic analysis design to examine the representation of imbalance and restoration in the film "The Lion King." A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the meaning contained in the visual text through interpretation of symbols, dialogue, storyline, and the surrounding cultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2022). According to Creswell and Poth (2022), qualitative research is an approach that aims to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups assign to a social or human phenomenon. Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems exploring the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Poth, 2022, p. 43).

The object of this research is Disney's "The Lion King," which is analyzed as a cultural text. Film is viewed as a communication medium containing a system of signs, cultural values, and ideologies that can be interpreted through narrative and semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1977). The research analysis units include scenes, dialogue, characters, narrative flow, and visual symbols related to the process of change from equilibrium, disequilibrium, to new equilibrium, based on Tzvetan Todorov's narrative structure (Todorov, 1977). The primary focus of the research is the representation of Simba's journey as a leader through Todorov's narrative structure and symbolic meanings constructed using Roland Barthes's semiotic framework (Barthes, 1972; Barthes, 1977).

The research data sources consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data is the film The Lion King, along with the dialogue, characters, and visual elements presented throughout the film, which serve as the primary object of analysis. Secondary data was obtained from books, scientific journal articles, and previous research discussing Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory, Roland Barthes's semiotics, animated films, leadership, and cultural representation. The use of these various sources aims to strengthen interpretations, provide an adequate theoretical foundation, and increase the credibility of the research results (Creswell & Poth, 2022).

Data collection techniques used were document analysis and film observation. According to Creswell and Poth (2022), documents are an important data source in qualitative research because they provide rich information about the phenomena being studied. Films were watched repeatedly to identify key scenes that demonstrate changes in narrative structure and the use





of visual symbols (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Researchers then took notes, grouped scenes, transcribed relevant dialogue, and collected screenshots as supporting evidence for the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2022).

Data analysis was conducted in stages, integrating Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory and Roland Barthes's semiotics. The first stage was identifying the narrative structure based on Todorov's five stages: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, attempt to repair, and new equilibrium (Todorov, 1977). These stages are used to explain how conflict develops, gives rise to character changes, and reaches resolution through a process of restoring equilibrium (Todorov, 1977).

The second stage uses Roland Barthes's semiotic framework by identifying the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings of each selected scene (Barthes, 1972). Denotative analysis is conducted to explain the literal meaning of visual and verbal signs, while connotative analysis is used to uncover implicit meanings related to social, moral, and cultural values (Barthes, 1977). Mythological analysis aims to identify ideologies represented through symbols such as Pride Rock, the Circle of Life, the changing conditions of the Pride Lands, and the characters of Simba and Scar as representations of ethical leadership and corrupt power (Barthes, 1972).

To ensure data validity, the study employed theoretical triangulation by comparing interpretations using two theoretical perspectives: Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory and Roland Barthes's semiotics. Theoretical triangulation was conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings constructed through story structure and sign systems (Creswell & Poth, 2022). The analysis results were also compared with various previous studies, thus enhancing the credibility of the interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2022). According to Creswell and Poth (2022), the use of multiple data sources, theories, and perspectives is a key strategy for enhancing credibility in qualitative research.

Through these steps, the study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how the narrative structure and sign systems in *The Lion King* work simultaneously to construct representations of leadership, moral responsibility, social balance, and the restoration of order as part of a cultural construct conveyed through film (Todorov, 1977; Barthes, 1972; Barthes, 1977).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a text-based analysis and semiotic interpretation of the film *The Lion King*. The analysis is conducted using two main frameworks: Tzvetan Todorov's five-stage narrative structure and Roland Barthes's semiotics. This approach is used to uncover how the





film represents imbalance and restoration in social, political, and ecological order. John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth (2022) emphasize that qualitative analysis focuses on the meaning of phenomena through the interpretation of texts, symbols, and cultural contexts. According to Creswell and Poth (2022), qualitative research aims to understand the meanings constructed by individuals or groups regarding a social phenomenon. In the context of film, these meanings are found not only in dialogue but also in visual symbols, story structure, and relationships between characters. Therefore, film is treated as a cultural text with a complex sign system that can be interpreted in depth. This study found that the narrative structure in film does not stand alone but is always intertwined with a semiotic sign system that constructs a particular ideology. Todorov's structure shows how imbalance and restoration become the main patterns of narrative, while Barthes's semiotics explains how ideological meaning is constructed through visual symbols and cultural myths.

DISCUSSION

The initial stage in Tzvetan Todorov's narrative structure is a state of equilibrium, a state of harmony before any disturbance alters the narrative's order. In *The Lion King*, this equilibrium is represented through King Mufasa's stable, legitimate, and morally and cosmically legitimate rule. This stability is understood not only as a political condition within the animal kingdom, but also as a representation of the natural order that is integrated with the laws of life. Anggraini (2024) argues that the equilibrium stage in the narrative serves as the primary foundation that allows conflict to develop significantly, because without initial stability, change would lack strong structural meaning. *The Lion King* establishes equilibrium not merely as a setting, but as a value system that unites nature, power, and spirituality in a single, idealized order.

The opening scene, featuring the song "Circle of Life," demonstrates a powerful representation of harmony between humans (symbolically), animals, and nature in the Pride Lands. The animal migration to Pride Rock illustrates the ecological order that follows the cycle of life, where each creature has its own role in maintaining the balance of nature. The moment when Rafiki lifts Simba into the sky reinforces the symbolism that Simba's birth is not simply a biological event, but part of a larger cosmic system. This act constructs Simba as a figure "marked" from the beginning to further the legitimacy of power. From Roland Barthes's semiotic perspective, this act carries not only the denotative meaning of lifting the lion cub, but also connotative meanings related to the legitimacy of power and the continuation of the life cycle. Furthermore, these symbols form a myth about leadership as "natural" and predestined.

Semiotically, Pride Rock serves as a signifier of stable and centralized power, while the





sunrise symbolizes divine legitimacy, life, and sacred beginnings. Barthes (1972) notes that at the mythical level, signs no longer simply represent reality but construct a system of ideological meanings accepted as "natural." The sunrise is not simply a natural phenomenon but also symbolizes that Mufasa's power is in harmony with the laws of the universe. Wijaya and Firmanto (2021) assert that visual symbols in films are often used to construct social myths regarding the legitimacy of power, thus leading viewers to accept hierarchical structures as natural and unquestionable. The equilibrium stage in this film not only depicts a stable state but also builds an ideological foundation for ideal leadership in harmony with nature.

The second stage is disruption, marked by Mufasa's death and Scar's betrayal. In Todorov's theory, narratives always move from equilibrium to imbalance as the primary mechanism for conflict formation (Anggraini, 2024). Mufasa's death is not only a personal tragedy but also the starting point for the collapse of the Pride Lands' social and ecological systems. Scar's subsequent seizure of power transforms the previously harmonious order into a barren and unproductive region. Hamid et al. (2022) argue that visual changes in films are often used to signal ideological and moral transformations, with shifts in color, lighting, and landscape serving as representations of broader social conditions.

The transformation of the Pride Lands from a green and fertile region into a dry wasteland full of bones and ecological poverty indicates a systemic degradation that is not only physical, but also moral. In Barthes's (1977) perspective, visual signs not only represent reality but also shape ideologies that are accepted as truth. Scar in this context is not only positioned as an antagonist, but as a symbol of corrupt and illegitimate power. Oja (2024) argues that the change in cinematic atmosphere in the film serves to reinforce the ideological message through the visualization of destruction, so that the audience can feel the moral impact of the abuse of power. This stage of disruption demonstrates the close relationship between illegitimate leadership and ecological and social damage.

The third stage is recognition, when Simba begins to realize his identity and responsibility after meeting Rafiki and experiencing a spiritual encounter with the "spirit" of Mufasa. Anggraini (2024) describes this as a turning point in the protagonist's consciousness, marking a shift from ignorance to self-understanding. Simba, previously living within the concept of Hakuna Matata, experiences a profound identity crisis, where he rejects his past and his responsibilities as heir to the throne. The reflection in the pool of water becomes an important symbol in this process, as water functions as a medium for introspection and self-recognition.

In Barthes's semiotics, the reflection in water has a denotative meaning as a visual reflection, but also a connotative one as a symbol of rebirth and self-awareness. Mufasa's





appearance in the sky reinforces the mythological dimension of this scene, where the voice of the ancestors represents an unavoidable moral obligation. Istiyanto et al. (2024) argue that signs in media serve to reinforce cultural ideology, particularly in building moral values such as responsibility and courage. Tanzil and Andriano (2023) note that animated films often use metaphorical visual symbols to depict the psychological transformation of characters, so that Simba's transformation is not only narrative but also ideological.

The fourth stage is the attempt to repair, when Simba returns to the Pride Lands to confront Scar and restore the imbalance that has occurred. In Todorov's structure, this stage represents a form of direct action to repair the damage that has occurred within the narrative system (Anggraini, 2024). The battle at Pride Rock represents the conflict between Simba's moral legitimacy and Scar's corrupt power. The fire that consumes Pride Rock serves as an ambivalent symbol, representing both destruction and purification.

Pamungkas et al. (2024) argue that the symbol of fire in films is often used to depict the transition from destruction to renewal. From Barthes' perspective, fire can be understood as a myth of ideological cleansing, where the old, corrupt system must be destroyed to allow for the birth of a new order. Simba's victory over Scar signifies the collapse of a tyrannical system and the return of moral legitimacy. Wahyudi and Fadilla (2026) argue that narratives of recovery are often constructed through extreme conflict to reinforce the moral values they convey to the audience.

The final stage is restoration (new equilibrium), when Simba becomes king and the Pride Lands are restored to fertility and balance. The rain that falls after Scar's defeat symbolizes ecological and social catharsis, marking the complete restoration of life systems. Odyn et al. (2023) argues that narrative endings in films are often cyclical, returning the story to its original state but at a more mature and reflective level. The symbol of the new lion cub emphasizes the continuity of the life cycle and the transformation of a more mature balance.

Barthes (1972) stated that myths function to normalize ideology in society, so the narrative structure of this film not only presents a story but also constructs a view of ideal leadership. The Lion King serves not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that represents ideologies about social responsibility, the balance of nature, and the legitimacy of power based on morality.

The Lion King not only presents a narrative of the protagonist's adventures, but also represents a complex system of meanings regarding power, morality, and ecological balance. Through the application of Tzvetan Todorov's narrative structure, the story's journey from equilibrium to imbalance, recognition, repair, and recovery demonstrates that social change





within the narrative always moves in a structured and meaningful cycle. Through Roland Barthes's semiotic approach, every visual element in the film—from characters and landscapes to natural symbols—not only functions as a literal representation but also carries connotative and mythological meanings that shape the story's specific ideology.

This film demonstrates that the concept of leadership is not simply inherited biologically but must be proven through moral responsibility, self-awareness, and the ability to restore social and ecological balance. Simba's transformation from exile to legitimate power illustrates that an ideal leader is an individual who is able to understand the consequences of his actions, learn from mistakes, and take responsibility for the order he leads. The imbalance that occurs in the narrative is not merely a temporary conflict, but a reflection of a moral crisis that must be resolved through conscious and corrective action. Ultimately, the integration of Todorov's and Barthes's theories in this analysis demonstrates that film, as a cultural text, has the ability to construct symbolic realities that influence audiences' perspectives on social values. The interpretation of film cannot be limited to mere entertainment; it must be understood as a space for ideological production that shapes how humans understand power, responsibility, and the balance of life.

IMPLICATION

Based on the analysis of *The Lion King* using Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory and Roland Barthes's semiotics, this study has several important theoretical, practical, and academic implications. Theoretically, this study reinforces that Todorov's narrative structure functions not only as a plot pattern but also as a framework for understanding ideological dynamics in media texts. The stages of balance, imbalance, and recovery demonstrate that film narratives always contain broader meanings of social change, not simply story development. Furthermore, the application of Barthes's semiotics demonstrates that visual signs in films possess layers of denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings that are interconnected in constructing a particular ideology. This research enriches the study of semiotics and narrative in film studies by demonstrating the integration between story structure and sign systems in shaping meaning.

Practically, this research provides filmmakers, educators, and audiences with an understanding that films function not only as entertainment but also as educational and value-forming media. The representation of leadership in films demonstrates that moral values such as responsibility, courage, and social awareness can be constructed through narrative and visual symbols. In education, particularly in media literacy, it is useful to improve students' ability to understand implicit messages in audiovisual media. Furthermore, for the film industry, the





results of this study can be used as a reference in developing narratives that are not only aesthetically appealing but also ideologically meaningful.

Academically, this research can serve as a reference for future research that examines film using narrative and semiotic approaches simultaneously. The study of Todorov's structure and Barthes's semiotics in a single analysis contributes to the development of a more comprehensive film research methodology. This research also opens up opportunities for further studies comparing representations of leadership in various other films, both animated and live-action, using the same or different theoretical approaches.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the integration of Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory and Roland Barthes's semiotic framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of how *The Lion King* constructs meaning and conveys ideological messages to audiences. The narrative structure, which moves from states of balance, imbalance, and restoration, not only serves as a storyline but also serves as a foundation for the formation of meanings about leadership, responsibility, and social harmony. The analysis shows that Simba's journey is not simply a story of an heir to the throne returning to the throne as king, but rather a representation of a maturation process that emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, courage to face the past, and commitment to restoring community well-being. A leader's legitimacy is depicted not solely based on lineage but through character, integrity, and the ability to restore social and ecological balance.

From Barthes's semiotic perspective, various visual symbols such as Pride Rock, the Circle of Life concept, and the changing conditions of the Pride Lands serve as signs containing denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. These symbols demonstrate that natural conditions reflect the moral qualities of a leader, thus positioning just leadership as a prerequisite for achieving balance in life. The conflict caused by Scar represents corrupt power and abuse of authority, ultimately leading to destruction for society and the environment. The film uses visual language to critique abuses of power while simultaneously instilling ethical values in its audience.

This research confirms that *The Lion King* is a cultural text that combines the power of narrative and symbolism to construct an understanding of leadership, responsibility, and the relationship between humans and the environment. The combined approach of Todorov's narrative theory and Barthes's semiotics has proven effective in revealing the close relationship between narrative structure and sign systems in generating deeper meaning. This research is



expected to serve as a reference for studies of film, communication, and culture, while also opening up opportunities for further research to examine animated films or other visual media using a combination of narrative and semiotic approaches in different social, cultural, and ideological contexts.

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