

Semiotic Analysis of Teacher's Role Representation in *Kungfu Panda 4* by DreamWorks Animation

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the representation of the teacher's role in the film *Kung Fu Panda 4* using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach. The research focuses on how visual signs, dialogues, and cultural symbols are constructed to represent the figure of the teacher as an educator, mentor, motivator, and moral role model. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, with the primary data source being the *Kung Fu Panda 4* film produced by DreamWorks Animation. Data were collected through documentation techniques by repeatedly watching the film, noting key scenes, and classifying the signs based on Peirce's categories of icons, indexes, and symbols. The findings reveal that the teacher's role is represented through icons in the form of Po's gestures and visualizations as an educator, indexes through cause-and-effect relationships between the teacher's instructions and the students' responses, and symbols involving language, moral values, and cultural artifacts. The discussion emphasizes that popular media, particularly animated films, not only serve as entertainment but also act as a medium for delivering educational values. This study contributes to the understanding of teacher representation in popular media and highlights the potential of animated films as an alternative educational medium.

INTRODUCTION

Film is one of the most influential media in shaping people's perceptions, beliefs, and cultural understanding. Through cinematic elements such as visuals, dialogues, and character development, filmmakers are able to represent social realities and values (Hall, 1997.) Representation in films does not merely reflect reality but constructs it through specific perspectives and ideological frameworks. In animated films, this process becomes even more significant because every visual detail and narrative choice is intentionally designed to deliver symbolic meanings to the audience (Barthes, 1972)

The Kung Fu Panda franchise, produced by DreamWorks Animation, is globally recognized for its rich cultural representation and strong educational values. The fourth installment, *Kung Fu Panda 4* (DreamWorks Animation, 2024) continues to explore themes of leadership, self-discovery, and mentorship through the journey of Po, the main protagonist. Within this film, the representation of the teacher's role is particularly significant, as it demonstrates how guidance, motivation, and knowledge transmission are constructed and symbolized.

In education, the teacher is often considered a key figure in shaping students' personal and intellectual development. According to (Vygotsky, 1978) teachers play

an essential role as mediators who facilitate knowledge acquisition through social interaction and scaffolding. Similarly, (Trier, 2001) argues that cinematic portrayals of teachers often influence public perceptions of pedagogy, authority, and mentorship. This aligns with the film's narrative, where Po's journey reflects the transformation from being a learner into becoming a mentor, highlighting the evolving responsibilities of a teacher.

From a semiotic perspective, films communicate meanings through signs that operate within a system of representation. Peirce's theory of semiotics, which classifies signs into icon, index, and symbol, provides a framework to analyze how films construct representations (Peirce, 1931). For instance, character gestures, dialogues, and visual motifs in *Kung Fu Panda 4* are not merely aesthetic choices but carry deeper symbolic significance about teaching roles and power dynamics (Tomaselli, 2010).

Previous studies have examined the representation of teachers and social values in films. (Novemby, 2020) explored the portrayal of teachers in *Big Brother*, emphasizing the influence of mentorship narratives on audience perceptions. (Kurniadi, 2017) analyzed the representation of an effective teacher in *The English Teacher* and highlighted how cinematic constructions reflect societal expectations of educators. (Prasetyana, 2022) also investigated the representation of nationalism in *Guru Bangsa Tjokroaminoto* using Peircean semiotics, showing how films use symbols and narratives to construct cultural and educational meanings. Furthermore, (Singhal, 2022) discusses *Kung Fu Panda* as an educational tool, illustrating how the film conveys motivation, leadership, and values through symbolic storytelling.

Considering these perspectives, *Kung Fu Panda 4* provides a rich ground for analyzing how the role of a teacher is represented through visual and narrative semiotics. By applying Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, this study aims to investigate the signs and meanings embedded in the film to uncover how mentorship, authority, and educational values are constructed.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the representation of the teacher's role in *Kung Fu Panda 4*. Qualitative research is designed to explore meanings, patterns, and symbolic representations within social and cultural contexts. Since the aim of this research is to understand how signs operate within the narrative and visual elements of the film, the qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing deeper meanings beyond surface-level descriptions (Hall, 1997.)

The method used in this study is semiotic analysis based on Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs. (Peirce, 1931) explains that signs operate through a triadic relationship consisting of the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning derived from the sign). Peirce classifies signs into three main types: icons, which represent their objects through resemblance; indexes, which have a causal or direct relationship with their objects; and symbols, which are based on cultural conventions and agreed-upon meanings. This framework enables the researcher to systematically identify how visual and narrative signs in *Kung Fu Panda 4* construct meanings related to mentorship, authority, and educational values.



The object of this research is the animated film *Kung Fu Panda 4*, produced by DreamWorks Animation and directed by Mike Mitchell and Stephanie Stine (DreamWorks Animation, 2024). The film is selected because it continues the central narrative of Po's transformation and his evolving role as a mentor. Its portrayal of guidance, motivation, and the transmission of knowledge provides rich material for examining how the teacher's role is represented symbolically.

The data for this research consist of selected scenes, dialogues, and visual cues from *Kung Fu Panda 4* that depict teaching, learning, and mentorship. These elements are identified, categorized, and analyzed based on Peirce's semiotic framework. According to (Tomaselli, 2010), semiotic analysis allows researchers to interpret the underlying meanings of cinematic elements, such as character gestures, facial expressions, camera angles, and symbolic objects. In this study, the signs are examined to reveal how the film communicates cultural and educational values through visual representation.

Data collection involves several stages. First, the film is carefully watched multiple times to identify scenes containing significant signs related to the teacher's role. Second, these scenes are segmented into frames to analyze their visual and narrative components. Third, the identified signs are categorized according to Peirce's triadic model into icons, indexes, and symbols. This categorization helps ensure consistency and clarity in interpreting the relationship between the signs and their meanings. Finally, the interpretations are cross-referenced with existing theories of representation (Barthes, 1972; Hall, 1997.) and the pedagogical framework of teachers' roles in films (Singhal, 2022; Trier, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978)

The analysis procedure focuses on uncovering how *Kung Fu Panda 4* symbolically constructs the image of a teacher. Drawing on previous studies, such as (Septiana & Alatas, 2023) and (Absharina, 2023) this research applies semiotic principles to explore cultural interpretations and hidden meanings behind visual and narrative signs. By integrating Peirce's framework with existing literature on film representation, the methodology provides a comprehensive approach for interpreting the teacher's role within the symbolic structures of the film.

This research design is expected to generate a systematic understanding of how meaning is constructed in animated films. Through the integration of semiotic theory, representation studies, and pedagogical perspectives, this methodology establishes a strong foundation for analyzing the symbolic portrayal of teaching roles in *Kung Fu Panda 4*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Kung Fu Panda 4* focuses on identifying and interpreting the signs that represent the teacher's role within the narrative. Using Peirce's semiotic framework, the findings reveal that the film constructs meaning through three categories of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols (Peirce, 1931) These signs are embedded within characters' dialogues, facial expressions, gestures, settings, and cinematic elements that collectively contribute to shaping Po's journey from a student to a mentor.

The analysis identifies nine significant signs from selected scenes, categorized into the three types of signs proposed by Peirce. These signs are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of Teacher's Role Representation in *Kung Fu Panda 4*

No	Scene	Sign	Type of Sign	Interpretant / Meaning
1	Po guides Zhen in the training hall	Po's demonstration of kung fu techniques	Icon	Represents Po's transformation into a mentor, visually showing the act of teaching (Vygotsky, 1978).
2	Master Shifu observes Po	Po's hesitant expression	Index	Indicates Po's uncertainty about his new responsibilities as a teacher.
3	Zhen imitates Po's movements	Mirrored kung fu poses	Icon	Reflects the teacher-student dynamic where knowledge is transferred through imitation (Trier, 2001).
4	Master Shifu gives Po advice	Dialogue: "Being a teacher means letting go."	Symbol	Symbolizes the cultural understanding of mentorship and leadership (Hall, 1997).
5	Po meditates before training Zhen	Lotus meditation posture	Icon	Represents inner wisdom, patience, and balance in teaching (Barthes, 1972)
6	Zhen saves Po in battle	Slow-motion heroic scene	Index	Shows that effective teaching empowers students to become independent problem-solvers (Kurniadi, 2017).
7	Po passes his staff to Zhen	Dragon Warrior's staff	Symbol	Signifies the transfer of knowledge, authority, and responsibility to the next generation (Singhal, 2022).
8	Final scene at the Jade Palace	Po teaching a new group of students	Icon	Depicts Po's acceptance of his identity as a mentor and his role in preserving kung fu tradition.
9	The Furious Five bow to Po	Respectful gesture	Symbol	Represents collective recognition of Po's authority as both a warrior and a teacher (Jimenez, 2022).

The findings demonstrate that *Kung Fu Panda 4* constructs the teacher's role using a combination of visual signs, symbolic objects, and narrative elements. Icons such as Po's training sessions and mirrored movements reflect the pedagogical process of learning through demonstration and imitation, aligning with (Vygotsky, 1978) ZPD theory and (Trier, 2001) view of cinematic education. Indexes in the film, like Po's hesitation and Zhen's independent heroism, depict the emotional development of both teacher and student. These cues highlight how effective mentorship fosters autonomy and personal growth, supporting (Kurniadi, 2017) analysis of teacher representations in films. Symbols, such as the passing of the Dragon Warrior's staff and the Furious Five bowing, provide cultural context for the narrative, illustrating the transmission of power, respect, and leadership. This finding supports (Hall, 1997) argument that representation actively constructs meaning rather than reflecting reality, while (Singhal, 2022) study of *Kung Fu Panda* emphasizes how motivational themes are embedded within symbolic acts.

Additionally, (Septiana & Alatas, 2023) strengthen the analysis by demonstrating that Peirce's semiotic framework effectively interprets signs within Eastern-influenced films, which resonates with the Chinese philosophical motifs in *Kung Fu Panda 4*. (Absharina, 2023) also reinforces the methodology, showing that Peirce's model can interpret layered signs in visual narratives beyond spoken dialogue. Meanwhile, (Royani, 2014) contributes insights into how symbolic visuals deepen

audience engagement, which is reflected in the cultural imagery present throughout the film.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of the teacher's role in *Kung Fu Panda 4* through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework of icons, indexes, and symbols. The analysis revealed that the film constructs a multifaceted image of a teacher who acts not only as an instructor but also as a motivator, cultural custodian, and moral role model. Through visual cues and symbolic signs, Po's character illustrates the relational aspects of teaching, where his gestures, emotional guidance, and demonstrations extend the teacher's role beyond the classroom, embedding cultural values, moral lessons, and the continuity of educational traditions.

The findings highlight that animated films can function as powerful pedagogical tools capable of transmitting educational and cultural values in an engaging way. By portraying perseverance, responsibility, and leadership, *Kung Fu Panda 4* demonstrates how popular media can influence public perceptions of teachers and education. This study also emphasizes the relevance of semiotic analysis in uncovering hidden meanings in media, contributing to both film studies and educational discourse.

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