

Inside Out: Semiotic Analysis

Daisy Garcia

Yulyanna Silva

Leslie Peña Rodriguez

University of North Texas at Dallas

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Abstract

In a film, the technique of interpretation is categorized by the analysis and evaluation of different elements. When breaking down a narrative the researcher or content creator should answer the question of what is the setting, plot, structure, characters, perspectives, and voice of the story. In regards of a semiotic analysis, the producer should be able to truly understand the methods of sign communication. Specifically focusing on symbols, signs, images, objects, icons, even text. Signified and signifiers: colors, shape, and structures are extremely important when producing a movie, ad, commercial, or story. In this report, the reader will be able to find a true detailed explanation based upon the evaluations made from a movie. The focus of this report is to discuss the semiotic and interpretation of the Disney Pixar film *Inside Out* (2015).

Keywords: Inside Out, color, shape, meaning, culture, stereotypes

Introduction

Inside Out, directed by Peter Docter and Ronnie del Carmen, follows the drastic adolescent changes of Riley Andersen, an 11 year-old girl, when she moves from Minnesota to California. She has five main emotions, which include Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust. These emotions watch Riley through a view-screen, and they use a control board to play a part in the choices that Riley makes throughout the film. Color, shape, gender, personalities, and stereotypes are shown throughout the film and an understanding of these concepts allows for a full interpretation of the mind. *Inside Out* is notably praised for its ability to present a look into the unconscious mind of a child and the self-development through the use of colors, shapes, emotions, and memories.

Behind the Design of Riley's Emotions

Color and shape have different meanings across cultures and they play a larger role throughout the film that aids in a better interpretation of the film. Beginning with the five emotions inside Riley to the color portrayed in the real world, everything is designed purposely. Riley's five emotions that are represented in the film each have a reason behind their design. Joy, which was the first emotion that Riley experienced as a baby is the main emotion that leads her. She was designed after a yellow star. The yellow color signifies happiness to the Anglo Saxon culture, which complements with Riley's life (Aslam, 2006, p. 5). In addition, before the move to San Francisco, Riley's room was yellow with stars on her ceiling and most of the clothing that she wears are bright yellow as well. When developing Joy, she was designed after a star because "stars are cosmic energy engines that produce heat, light, ultraviolet rays, x-rays, and other forms of radiation" ("Stars Information and Facts", 2009). In addition, Joy was added several elements such as a halo, an edge of energy and a transparent body to convey her energy (Angelidis Merrell, Moyer, and Reisch, 2015).

Sadness is the second emotion that Riley experiences. She was designed after a blue teardrop. She can also portray the season of winter. "She does not embody the romantic white winter, but rather those dark rainy days" (González). She even mentions that rainy days are her favorite because water can get inside rain boots. The color blue is associated with intelligence, communication, trust, efficiency, duty, and logic, which reflects Sadness's personality when Joy tells her to read the manuals she memorizes it and later comes useful when they are trying to find their way out of Long Term Memory (Labrecque and Milne, 2011). In addition, she stops to think about the danger that can come of entering the tunnel shortcut of Abstract Thought, which

is where logic comes in. Even though the color blue has been made to symbolize depression, such as saying “singing the blues” and “feeling blue”, “*Inside Out* offers a new approach to sadness. Its central insight: Embrace sadness, let it unfold, engage patiently with a preteen’s emotional struggles. Sadness will clarify what has been lost (childhood) and move the family toward what is to be gained: the foundations of new identities, for children and parents alike” (Keltner & Ekman, 2015). Furthermore, in Maori culture, they have what is known as Roimata, or the drop stone. It is a combination of a teardrop and a version of a Toki. “The Roimata is often called the comfort stone, and was given as a way to show empathy, solidarity and shared emotion. Many people use the symbol of Roimata to convey reassurance and it is a powerful healing symbol” (McManus, 2016). By using a teardrop as the shape for sadness, it symbolizes the healing that provides the family with a positive outcome in the new city once Sadness and Joy return to headquarters.

The third emotion that Riley experiences is Fear. As she is growing up, she is becoming more aware of her surroundings, and this is where fear comes into play. He was designed after a purple raw nerve. It is interesting to note that in the Anglo Saxon culture, purple is associated with authority and power, however, in Korea, the color purple is associated with fear (Aslam, 2006, p. 5). The fact that he is a nerve works really well with the role he plays. “Fear starts with a trigger. The signal quickly reaches the thalamus at the center of the brain and travels down to the amygdala, at the base of the brain. From here a neurotransmitter called glutamate then carries the signal even deeper into the brain” (Dickerson, 2015). The signal is able to be carried out throughout the body through nerves. This signifies the important role that nerves play on fear. The design of Fear goes to the extent of the single strand of hair that he has on his head.

“Normally, it will curl downwards behind his head. If he is concerned or afraid, it will form a zigzag shape. If he gets sad, it will keep its regular curl but droop downwards” (Fear). It is interesting to see that these emotions can have other emotions other than what they are. His hair is visible but overlooked enough to keep it hidden.

Anger was designed after a red fire brick and Hades from Hercules (Anger). The color red has many different interpretations ranging from love, danger, blood, even physical strength, but for the emotion Anger, it is describing its fury (Berry, 2012, p. 1). Anger is first introduced in the film when Riley’s father does not let her have dessert because she will not eat broccoli. Fear immediately explodes and fire blows from the top of his head, just like Hades. An accumulation of bricks make a brick wall. This can symbolize limit, barrier, blockage, escalation, and protection (Brick Wall). Anger escalates when he feels that Riley needs protection. In the film, he believes he is protecting Riley by making her run back to her hometown in order to make more new memories and save her personalities. At this point, he plays as a barrier that no one can get through.

The character Disgust was introduced into Riley’s mind when her father was trying to give her broccoli. She was designed to look like a green broccoli because broccoli is a vegetable that most children in the U.S. dislike. According to Aslam, green is associated with envy in the Anglo Saxon culture, but in Asean it is associated with disease. This confirms Disgust’s personality; in the film, her role was to keep Riley from being poisoned physically and socially. The color that these emotions are associated with confirm the personality that they have.

Color In The Real World

Color outside Riley's mind also plays an important part in the film. In the beginning of the film, when the family is traveling from Minnesota to San Francisco, colors change from blues and greens to gray. Gray symbolizes dirty, dull, depression, which is how Riley starts to feel about the move when nothing is really as she imagined it would be (Bourn, 2010). The house itself is very dull, there are no bright colors compared to the green and yellow walls in her previous house. To further elaborate on the changes of colors, when Joy and Sadness are kicked out of headquarters, Riley's clothing changes drastically. In almost every scene, you see Riley wearing a gray sweater, in comparison to the bright yellow clothing that she often wore before the move to San Francisco with her family. Another analysis that can be combined by the reason of the move to San Francisco is the attention the producer focused when Riley stares at the Golden Gate Bridge. "The Golden Gate Bridge is among the most photographed bridges in the world, recognized internationally as a majestic symbol of San Francisco, and the United States. But for decades, and for scores of mourning families, the bridge has also become a symbol of pain." mentions an article by The Washington Post (Schmidt, 2017). This bridge has been well known for its structure and beauty. Not only has it been famous for that, but many individuals have traveled long distances to climb on the bridge and commit suicide. Due to Riley's emotional state, the move to San Francisco truly affected her. She began to not be herself and fall under a state of depression. In relationship to the Golden Gate bridge there are many people that commit suicide due to the devastation of falling into a state of anxiety or depression. Inside out did not elaborate on this thought/analysis, but due to semiotic analysis it could be a reasonable explanation to why focus on the Golden Gate Bridge and the move to San Francisco compared to other places in the world.

Differences Across Cultures

Not all cultures are the same, and if two cultures come across each other that are different, then there can sometimes be multiple misunderstandings between people. Obviously, it would have to be depending by the action they provide. In this case, the semiotic analysis from the story focuses on the hate for vegetables by young children in America, specifically targeting broccoli. In comparison to other places, some individuals can take the specific actions as something else and not truly understand the message it is trying to deliver. Often times, certain criteria like where you are from, what you believe in, and even the people you surround yourself with can define your culture. Depending on the culture the person is in, each meaning can be interpreted in many different ways. The film exposed Rylie feeling disgusted over vegetables, which stereotypically in the United States this type of action is well known from young children. In the case of the Japanese movie release, the criteria of the broccoli had to be changed due to their understanding and symbolism of broccoli.

Like previously mentioned, there were some differences in other versions of the film from specific scenes to the actual title of the film that the director planned ahead of time to make sense in other countries (Acuna, 2015). In the Japanese version of the film, the title is changed to *Insaido Heddo*, which translates to Inside Head, while in France it was titled *Vice -Versa* (Inside Out Release Info). Another interesting thing to note is the scene in which Riley did not want to eat the broccoli. In the Japanese version, the vegetables that Riley does not want are bell peppers not broccoli. The reason behind this is because in the Japanese culture, kids like broccoli more than they do bell peppers. Another scene that was changed to appeal to an international audience was the scene in which the family is eating dinner in the kitchen, and the emotions inside the

father's head are watching hockey. The alternate scene that was used was mostly the same with the exception that the emotions were watching soccer. It was changed because soccer is a much more popular sport in other countries compared to that of hockey.

Non-Verbal Language

While the explanation of each color, shape, and personality have been discussed, there were some similar connections from Riley's personality to her father and mother. During the movie there was a scene where all three were sitting in the kitchen having dinner. Her mother begins to ask Riley about her day at school. Due to Joy and Sadness no longer being present at headquarters, in the mind of Rylie, they could no longer manage the control board that control her actions and emotions. In this scene, Riley begins to feel disgusted and answers to her mother in sarcasm, using body language, and rolling her eyes. Once her mother is able to read these gestures, she is concerned and signals her husband using non-verbal language for him to talk to Riley about school. While this is happening, the director decided to change perspectives and transition from outside in the dining room table to inside each of the character's mind.

In each of the parents mind, there was a visual representation of the colors and non-verbal languages used as a form of communication. Both parents are concerned for her daughter, and they stereotypically encapsulate the definition of what a typical mother and father act in a situation similar to this one. The director transitions us first to the emotions and "headquarters" of the mother. The group of anger, joy, sadness, disgust, and fear are all dressed similar to how Rylie's mom looks in real life. This is shown by having all of the emotions wear red glasses. The lead character controlling her emotions is Sadness. Not due to her being sad all the time, but stereotypically women are known to be emotional individuals. Sadness being blue targets the

individual to cry. On the other hand, her father is stereotyped as the man of the house, and he who has his focus on sports. While in his mind, all the characters are alarmed because they didn't pay attention to the wife's non-verbal language. The emotions begin to panic and remove a visual of a soccer game being played. This can be portrayed as "day-dreaming" while they all sat in the kitchen. Riley's dad is focused more on being the bread maker and helping support his family. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the emotions that are in Riley's head are mix gendered compared to her parents. Riley's mother's emotions are all female, and her father's emotions are all male. This is because Riley is still developing and trying to find herself.

This particular scene was extremely important because as a viewer you were able to go inside the parent's minds. Headquarters for both of them are designed in a unique manner. The mother has lighter colors, and in the background, she had memories of joy, sadness, and fear. In comparison to her husband's, his setting/layout of headquarters was featured by using dark grey color. It is similar to what a technical IT labratory looks like. In the background, he mostly had memories that were of fear, sadness, and anger. Not a lot of joy was present in his mind. This is tied to the fact that he is a stressed adult trying to figure out solutions to his new investment of the company he owns. Stereotypically, adults begin to have more responsibilities which causes them to focus on being financially stable rather than focusing on how to truly enjoy life and experience joy.

Abstract Thought

Joy and Sadness meet Riley's imaginary friend Bing Bong. After explaining their situation, Bing Bong proposes to use a shortcut that will help them get from Long Term Memory storage to Imagination Land. The shortcut tunnel is a section of Riley's mind known as Abstract

Thought. In the human mind, abstract thoughts “are those that focus on the relationships between representations rather simple stimulus features” (Dumontheil, 2014). An example of abstract thought as presented by Andrew McIntosh, a professor of thermodynamics and combustion theory at the University of Leeds, would be the concept of beauty without needing to look at a beautiful object in order to understand what beauty is.

Before going into the tunnel, there is a sign on the door that says danger. Sadness tries to convince Joy that the shortcut is dangerous. However, due to Joy and Bing Bong’s perseverance to return Riley’s core memories back to Headquarters, they disregard the sign, and walk in. The other one responds with “Loneliness,” and they close the door. The tunnel’s light turns on, and Sadness begins to worry, and she explains the four stages that are expected to occur in Abstract Thought. First, Non-objective fragmentation turns them into shapes resembling cubism. Every character keeps the same form, but they have sharper edges and their eyes and mouths are placed differently on their head. Second, the stage of deconstructing makes them fall apart while they are still in a cubism form. Third, in this stage they turn into 2D shapes. Each character now has lost a variety of colors. They have four to five colors that still represent their character, and only have one eye as well as their mouths. The last stage is nonfigurative. In this stage, the characters have lost all their detail. Joy’s color is yellow, and she is shaped as a star, Sadness’ color is blue, and she is shaped as a circle, and Bing Bong’s color is pink, and he is shaped as an elephant’s trunk. None of them have eyes or mouths. “Abstract thought is dangerous because it may erase who we are, complex and embodied beings, it strips us of our ‘deepness’ —as Bing Bong cries” (González). Nevertheless, because the film has associated and established a color with a

character from the very beginning, the audience is able to figure out the characters with the simple use of color.

Conclusion

Despite *Inside Out* being a children's film, there is a lot more to the film that one can see when analyzed. Communication is a part of what we all know now as symbols, signs, images, objects, icons, even text. Meanings can be expressed in multiple different ways with semiotics. These all play a huge part on how semiotics can be defined. After discussing the different outcomes and mastering the movies analysis, we can truly understand how symbolism in colors, body language, and shapes are essentially the main drivers of the film. Colors contribute to the process of interpreting the signs that exist in the film *Inside Out*. The colors of each emotion are constantly shown throughout the film. Each shape was also carefully selected in order to make sure that it supported the emotion.

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