

The Grammar of Disney Long Animations: A Structuralist Reading

Vyrna Santosa

English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University,
Surabaya-Indonesia

e-mail: vyrna@peter.petra.ac.id

Abstract: Treating several animated films as texts, the analysis of this particular genre of entertainment is using structuralist narratology, which is applied to establish a general grammar of Disney long animations by revealing the underlying rules governing the film narratives. Discussing the typical characters and actions, the construction of “function”, and the significant actions which shape the story, this study reveals the six actant/roles based on the prescribed characterization, three basic patterns of how each actant is related to one another, and the twelve sets of basic arrangement of functions as the single basic structure of all Disney long animations. This study proves how loyal and consistent the creators of Disney long animations are toward the underlying basic structure of the story.

Key words: actant, function, structure, narrative, narratology, grammar.

Disney animated films have been long associated with incredible versions of classical stories, and unforgettable warmhearted characters. The films are usually packed with sensational musical instruments and the films’ hit singles are sung by famous artists. The story, the characters, and the music, are definitely the main elements of Disney animated filmmaking. Therefore, it is interesting to discuss “the secret recipe” that makes every single Disney animated production a huge success and are well accepted in any parts of the world. Treating the animated films as texts, the analysis of this particular genre of entertainment is using structuralist narratology, “a new poetics which will establish a general ‘grammar of literature, the underlying rules governing literary practice” (Selden, 1993, p. 109).

Structuralist narrative theory has originated from some elements of linguistic analogies. The grammar of sentence structure, or syntax, is the

fundamental of narrative rules, which Todorov, as cited in Selden (1993) refers as “narrative syntax”:

The most elementary syntactic division of the sentence unit is between subject and predicate: ‘The knight (subject) slew the dragon with his sword (predicate)’. Evidently this sentence could be the core of an episode or even an entire tale. If we substitute a name (Launcelot or Gawain) for ‘the knight’, or ‘axe’ for ‘sword’, we retain the same essential structure. ...the whole corpus of tales is constructed upon the same basic set of functions. A function is the basic unit of the narrative ‘language’ and refers to the significant actions which form the narrative (p. 109).

A.J. Greimas in his *Semantique Structurale* (1966) has come up with “the universal grammar of narrative” by applying to it a semantic analysis of sentence structure. He proposes 3 pairs of binary oppositions that cover all six roles, or ‘actants’, Propp’s term for the dramatist personae:

Subject/Object
Sender/Receiver
Helper/Opponent

These pairs describe three basic patterns which usually occur in all narratives:

1. desire, search, or aim (Subject/Object)
2. communication (Sender/Receiver)
3. auxiliary support or hindrance (Helper/Opponent) (p. 111)

According to Saussure, “language is the primary sign system whereby we structure our world.” Thus, language system is similar to any other sign system of social behaviour like fashion, table manners, and sports (Bressler, 1999, p. 93). All of those are considered as texts with underlying systems that construct them. Like language, these expressions of social behaviors generate meaning through a system of signs (p. 93). Like language, the system of signs can also be found in the product of social behaviour, for example film.

Therefore, the purpose of analyzing Disney animated films using structuralist narratology is to retain the shared essential structure in any Disney animated versions by revealing the single underlying structure that is embedded in any Disney animated films as the “secret formula” behind the success of Disney as the major animated filmmaker. This study is

going to show how the three pairs of 'actants' fall neatly into the three basic patterns of narratives by identifying the 'actants' of each animated films, and how the 'actants' play their roles in the basic patterns of narratives. Then, the patterns and the 'actants' are developed into 'functions' as the basic units of narrative language. 'Functions' will reveal the important actions that form the story.

Applying structuralist reading in analyzing Disney long animations as cultural icon is practical indeed since "structuralists apply the insights of linguistics to literature and culture" (Ryan, 2002, p. 26). Thus, structuralist reading of Disney long animations means treating animated films as cultural icon that has the underlying system. Patanella in *Walt Disney and Fairytales* has argued that Disney long animations are indeed the cultural product of America, involving not only skillful Disney animators, but also technical innovations, which consistantly make Disney as the forerunner of animation making. Its products have "underscored the two-pronged combination of scientific wizardry and artistic craft that made Disney a formidable force in American cinema." (para. 1). Using fairytales as "the pure escapism" is nonetheless the reaffirmation of Disney toward the society's trust on its interpretations on fairytales that become appealing not only for children, but also for the whole family:

They were basic enough in their appeal to be marketed directly towards children, but the romance in some of the stories (*Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*) was also appealing to adults. This broad appeal was essential for maximum profits; had the Disney films been solely "children's entertainment" many parents might have simply dropped the kids off at the theater while they went to see a different production. Disney, however, designed films for the entire family to enjoy. (para. 12)

Thus, Disney long animations have a cultural baggage that somewhat becomes the universal standard for a good and marketable (American) product for all age.

This study is going to show that although Disney long animated films are based on various thematic presentations, produced by different teams of production and at different times, in fact they share single structure of narration. Furthermore, using structuralist reading, this study is paying attention to a character "not because he or she refers to a particular kind of person with certain human qualities",

but he or she is “considered a part in a textual system in which that character’s function is determined by its relations to the other functional parts of the system. ... they seek to understand the logic of the plot, the way it is structured by grammatical rules similar to those of language.” (Ryan, 2002, p. 28) As seen in this study, Disney ‘actants’ will never come alive without each character’s relation to one another. Each character has his/her own ‘function’ in contributing meaning to the narrative. Losing one ‘actant’ means missing one significant element of the basic structure of Disney narrative rules.

There are six Disney animations chosen in order to find the basic structure of Disney narrative rules, and the choices are based on the different types of the main characters, namely female, male, and animal characters. There are "Mulan" and "Little Mermaid" for female character animations, "Hercules" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" for male character animations, and "The Lion King" and "A Bug's Life" for fable animations. As seen from the identified typical characters and actions, and the construction of ‘function’, Disney long animations have always been based on the quest for self-identity and the fulfillment of personal desire.

Disney animated films have a set of six typical ‘actants’. Those typical characters are the hero, the hero's donors, the hero's lover, the villain, the villain's helpers, and the dominant character (an antagonist, or simply parents/elders). The following table shows how each ‘actant’ is found in all the chosen Disney animated films:

Titles :/ Actants:	The Hero	The Donors	The Hero's Lover	The Villain	The Villain's Helpers	The Dominant Character
"Mulan"	Mulan	Mushu, Cri-Kee, Khan	Capt. Lie Shang	Shan Yu	The Elite Huns, the Falcon	Fa Zhou
"The Little Mermaid"	Ariel	Sebastian, Scuttle, Grimsby	Prince Eric	Ursula	Flotsam & Jetsam	Triton
"Hercules"	Hercules	Phil, Pegasus	Megara	Hades	Pain & Panic, the Cyclops	The Citizens
"The Hunchback of Notre Dame"	Quasimodo	The Gargoyles	Esmeralda	Judge Frollo	The troops	Judge Frollo
"The Lion King"	Simba	Timon, Pumbaa, Rafiki	Nala	Scar	The Hyenas	Mufasa
"A Bug's Life"	Flik	The circus bugs, Dot	Princess Atta	Hooper	The grasshoppers	The Queen

Mostly the Disney heroes are hopelessly dependent on their donors. The "communication" between "senders/receivers", as Greimas mentions in his "Semantique Structurale" (Selden, 1993, p. 111) is obviously applied in the relationship between the hero/receiver and the donor/sender. Mushu, the fast-talking hyperactive guardian dragon, is "illegally" sent by Mulan's ancestors to protect Mulan. However, it is obvious that Mulan's disguise as a man could have been easily discovered without Mushu's helps. Without her underwater friends, especially Sebastian the crab-composer and Grimsby the sea lark, Ariel would have totally been hopeless in front of Prince Eric without her voice, and unable to stop the wedding just in time. Zeus's gift, Pegasus, is a great help for Hercules in completing his heroic deeds- and without Phil, the hero trainer, Hercules would have never been able to control his extraordinary strength. The Gargoyles successfully encourage Quasimodo to leave the bell tower for experiencing "the world out there". Timon and Pumbaa with their "hakuna matata" are able to make Simba put his past behind, yet Rafiki the monkey is the one who is able to put Simba back to "the circle of life". No matter how clever Flik is, he is nothing without his circus bug pals, and especially without little Dot, who successfully builds Flik's self-confidence back. Thus, one of Greimas's basic patterns in narrative, namely "communication (Sender/Receiver)", is proven.

Furthermore, each of the 'actants' mentioned in the above table has his/her own "functions" in the story. Each function has significant elements, which can be found in any versions. Those significant elements are 1) the hero's desire, 2) the chaos, 3) the hero's clash with the dominant character, 4) the hero's failure to recognize his/her identity, 5) "the shell", 6) the hero's task, 7) the donor's contribution, 8) punishment and reward, 9) the hero's ability for self-identification and the fulfillment of his/her desire, which leads to 10) happiness.

The first and the second significant elements are interchangeable, yet it does not influence the flow of the story. For example, the heroes in "Mulan", "Little Mermaid", and "Hercules" introduce their (hidden) desire after the chaos, while Quasimodo, Flik, and Simba reveal their desire, dreams, and wishes before they are involved in chaotic situations. Once again, another Greimas's basic patterns in narrative, "desire, search, or aim (Subject/Object)", is found (p. 111).

Using beautiful original score, the hero's hidden desire is usually discovered through song, a typical Disney version of soliloquy. In terms

of identifying the "black and white" of the characters, the "evil" original scores are specially arranged for the villains to reveal their evil hidden plans, so the audience will easily identify "the false heroes". The clash of the hero and the villain, packed with comic battles between the donors of both sides, identifies another pair of Greimas' basic pattern of "auxiliary support or hindrance (Helper/Opponent)" (p. 111).

At the end, the narratives will always end up with the punishment for the villain, and the reward for the hero. The following list shows the ways the 'actants' follow a certain set of sequences as the same basic arrangement of 'functions' of the Disney narratives:

1. *The hero* introduces his/her DESIRE.
2. *The hero* unintentionally initiates CHAOS.
3. The CHAOS leads to a CLASH with *the dominant character*.
4. *The hero* FAILS TO RECOGNIZE him/her-SELF
5. *The hero* leaves THE SHELL to complete a TASK.
6. *The hero* must submit certain CONDITION to complete the TASK.
7. *The donor* CONTRIBUTES the completion of the TASK.
8. The COMPLETION of the TASK (by *the hero*),
9. *The villain* is PUNISHED.
10. *The hero* is REWARDED.
11. *The hero* FINDS SELF-IDENTITY and FULFILLS DESIRE.
12. *The hero* is HAPPY with his/her lover.

Disney long animated films always have the first chaotic, yet comical situation. This special scene has many purposes, but it is mainly an introduction to the true nature of the hero (Ariel's impulsiveness and obsession for collecting human's things, Hercules's extraordinary strength, Flik's smart ideas yet mostly done recklessly), the setting and its customs (Chinese custom of arranged marriage and the important of family honor in "Mulan"), and the consequences of breaking the rules (Quasimodo's terrible humiliation as the King of Fools and the Hyenas' attack on Simba).

However, the chaotic situation always brings further implication. The chaos is so significant that if it is omitted, the story will lose its sense. Following shortly after, is the sense of alienation, and the revelation of both false self-identity and hidden desire. Mulan, for example, is unable to identify her own reflection; Ariel, broken hearted after watching his father destroyed her collections, feels that no one can understand her

dreams to be "a part of that world"; after unintentionally messing up the city with his strength, Hercules begins to question his origin; Quasimodo's false perception of regarding himself as a monster; Simba's innocent pride to be the next king; and Flik's desire to make things different.

Furthermore, in order to pursue their desire as well as complete the task assigned to them, the heroes have to leave their shells. The "shells" are their places where, with or without their concerns, have been limiting them to reach "another part of the world", and also to make peace with themselves. Mulan, disguised as a young man named A Ping, leaves her house to substitute his old father as a warrior; Ariel leaves the Underwater Kingdom to be "a part of that world", as indicated in her original score; Hercules leaves his foster parents to find Phil, who will train him to become a true hero; Quasimodo leaves the bell tower to save Esmeralda; Simba leaves his "hakuna matata" world to face the true nature of himself as a part of the "circle of life"; Flik leaves the ant colony to find savage bugs. Leaving behind the "shells", the heroes, with the helps of the donors, are able to complete the tasks, and in the same time make peace with themselves when they find the missing piece of the "self".

The following table shows the fidelity of the Disney animators and the scriptwriters toward the basic pattern of the films. The numbers used refer to the twelve items of "function" sequences mentioned before:

Titles:/ Functions:	"Mulan"	"Little Mermaid"	"Hercules"	"The Hunch- back of Notre Dame"	"The Lion King"	"A Bug's Life"
1. Desire	"I want to keep my father standing tall."	"I want to be a part of that world."	"I don't want to be different."	"I want just once to be out there."	"I just can't wait to be a king."	"I want to make things different."
2. Chaos	Trying to save Cri-kee, hurting the Matchmaker instead.	Exploring the wrecked ship, being attacked by a shark & exposed to the surface.	Helping an old man with his crate, ruining the whole city instead.	Being a part of the Festival of the Fools, being humiliated as a hideous creature instead.	Exploring the Elephant Graveyard, being attacked by the Hyenas instead.	Showing the new harvesting machine, plunging the whole harvested seeds into the pond instead.

3. Clash with the dominant character due to violation	Fa Zhou's disappointment on Mulan's failure to please the Matchmaker.	Triton's disappointment on Ariel's failure to stay under water.	Citizen's rejection on Hercules' extraordinary strength.	Frolo's disappointment on Quasi's failure to stay inside the bell tower.	Mufasa's disappointment on Simba's failure to stay away from the graveyard.	Queen's disappointment on Flick's reckless behaviour.
4. Identity failure	"I will never bring honor to my family."	"I want to know what it feels like walking around with feet."	"Who am I?"	"I am not normal, I don't belong to this world."	"I'm the murderer of my father."	"I'm only a trouble-maker."
5. The shell; the task	Leaving her family; defending China.	Leaving her underwater world; looking for Prince Eric.	Leaving his family; proving himself a true hero.	Leaving the bell tower; saving Esmeralda.	Leaving the forest; saving Pride Land.	Leaving the ant colony; looking for helps
6. Condition	Disguising as a man for substituting her father.	Giving up her voice for a pair of legs.	Giving up his strength for Meg's safety.	Leaving the bell tower with Phoebus.	Putting his fear behind.	Finding 'savage' bugs.
7. Donor's contribution	Mushu helps Mulan survive in the male world.	Sebastian helps Ariel survive as human; Grimsby discovers the false hero (Ursula).	Phil trains Hercules heroic skills.	Gargoyles encourage Quasi to put his fear behind, and leave the bell tower.	Rafiki encourages Simba to put his fear behind, and return to the Pride Land.	Dot encourages Flik to believe in himself, and return to the colony.
8. Completion	Defeating the Huns, saving China.	Defeating Ursula to win Eric, saving the Underwater Kingdom.	Defeating Hades, saving Olympus.	Defeating Frollo, saving the whole Paris.	Defeating Scar, saving the Pride Land.	Defeating the grasshoppers, saving the ant colony.
9. Punishment	Shan Yu is killed.	Ursula is killed.	Hades loses his power.	Frollo is killed.	Scar is killed by the Hyenas.	Hopper is eaten by the Bird.
10. Reward	Acknowledged as the hero of China and as the Emperor's consultant.	Given an eternal pair of legs.	Given immortal soul.	Accepted as the way Quasi is, acknowledged as hero.	Acknowledged as the King of Pride Land.	Acknowledged as the hero of the ant colony.

11. Self-identity; fulfilled desire	Identifying herself as a worthy daughter; bringing honor to her family.	Identifying herself as a human; living with human.	Identifying himself as a son of god; knowing why he is different.	Identifying himself as a worthy creature; leaving the bell tower for good.	Identifying himself as a worthy son; becoming the successor of Mufasa.	Identifying himself as a worthy ant; making the ant colony "never be the same again."
12. Happiness and love	Winning Capt. Lie Shang's heart.	Marrying Prince Eric.	Marrying Meg.	Uniting Esmeralda and Capt. Phoebus.	Marrying Nala.	Winning Princess Atta's heart.

All the hero's tasks are becoming more virtuous during the development of the story. While saving his father, Mulan finds herself saving the whole kingdom of China from the savage Huns. Ariel, thinking her father can never understand her, leaves him to the surface to pursue her personal satisfaction, yet she ends up saving his father's life and the whole underwater Kingdom from the clutch of Ursula. Hercules and Quasi are only planning to save their sweethearts, yet they also end up dealing with people's lives in their heroic deeds. Simba and Flik are also able to restore order in their habitats. The completion of the task becomes a whole lot more meaningful and significant for public affairs than personal satisfaction.

Furthermore, throughout the development of the story, the hero also experiences a quest for a self-identity and fulfillment of his/her desire. It is like watching a process of metamorphosis; the hero begins with the inability to see oneself, and while pursuing and completing the task, the hero finds the missing piece of the self at the end, just like Shakespearean comedy, the stories end in love and marriage, a typical happy-ending classical story. The hero successfully makes peace with him/herself, and reveals more virtuous deeds. As an example, Hercules is hurt by Meg since he believes she has betrayed him. Nevertheless, he is still willing to surrender his soul as a substitute of Meg's life. His sacrifice, on the other hand, is perceived by gods as the genuine act of a hero; thus, he is rewarded an immortal life.

Upon the completion of the task, the hero also achieves his/her personal dreams and wishes. Both personal and public affairs are settled in one place, and everybody is happy. As seen from "Hercules", the hero has successfully put Olympus back in order (public) as well as achieved his dream to marry Meg (personal), although it means he has to sacrifice his

immortal life since an immortal god does not belong to the world of the mortals, the world of Meg. However, no one complains, especially the young audience in theaters, because it is the best ending for Hercules and Meg.

Although it seems that all Disney animated films are only made to sell happiness and dreams, the world is not always pictured as sweet and full of beautiful colors. In fact, *Mulan*, unlike her “older sisters”, is a far cry from the passive versions of *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. Thus, *Mulan*’s characterization is “geared toward the older audience, making the film as one of the good examples of a non-condescending family film”. It is one of the best crafted animated stories, decked with strong character motivation, and wrapped in cyclical nature of journeys and adventures (Patanella, 1998, para. 2)

However, Patanella in *Walt Disney and Fairytales* has also admitted that *Mulan*’s older sisters are not easily replaced by *Mulan* since Disney animations have somewhat moulded the stereotypes of ideal American women as evidenced in both characterization and the original scores:

The Disney heroines were not the preteens of traditional fairytales but young women who were both beautiful and contained a muted sexuality; this would get the Disney company in trouble in the feminist era, but it also created an idealized version of women that was unlike any depiction in any other type of film. True, this formula also resulted in a string of bland, too-good-to-be-true Princes, but at the same time it was responsible for a series of well-written sentimental songs that continues to this day with “A Whole New World” and “Can You Feel The Love Tonight?” (para. 13)

Thus, when the animations are well-distributed throughout nations, the portrayal of stereotypical ideal women are also embedded and totally consumed by young (female) audience..

Nevertheless, generally speaking the adult audience always perceive Disney animations ‘fine’ for children. Through the struggle of the protagonists and the comic elements packed in a typical set of story-telling formula, the audience, especially little ones, begin to learn an early lesson of the basic philosophical idea of life in an entertaining way. They begin to realize that they live in a tough world; however, as long as they are honest and believe in themselves, they can survive, and also have some fun.

When all the ‘actants’ fall in their places in the Disney grammar, the audience will never realize that actually they have seen the same structure again and again under the typical basic patterns of narrative. With new characters, different settings of time and place, and catchy original scores, old legends like *Hercules* and *Mulan* have become vibrant, and sold well. After all these years, the entertaining power of Disney's ‘secret formula’ still works, and sells well enough.

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