THE NARRATIVE CONNOTATION OF FASHION ELEMENTS IN ANIMATION PERFORMANCES UNDER THE VISUAL SYMBOLIC THRESHOLD

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the narrative connotation of fashion elements in animation under the theory of visual semiotics. Through the analysis of three classic animation works, "Mulan," "Paradise Kiss," and "Spirited Away," it reveals that fashion elements not only enhance visual aesthetics but also convey characters' inner worlds and emotional states through sign systems, driving the story forward. For example, in "Mulan," the transformation of costumes symbolizes her struggle between family and social expectations; in "Paradise Kiss," fashion choices reflect characters' personalities and psychological states; in "Spirited Away," clothing changes showcase character growth. Visual semiotics provides an effective method to interpret these elements, revealing their deeper meanings.
Keywords: Fashion Elements, Animation, Visual Semiotics, Narrative, Character Development, Cultural Symbols

INTRODUCTION

As a unique art form, animation has been closely intertwined with social structures and cultural contexts since its inception. Initially, animation was mostly focused on showing simple actions and basic storylines, for example, early Disney animation was mainly concerned with entertainment and narrative (Wells, 1998). As technology progressed, animators were given more advanced tools that allowed for more colorful plots, characters, and visual experiences in animation (Pilling, 1998). The modern animation is not only a storytelling tool, but also a powerful medium for engaging in social discourse and criticizing popular culture (Lamarre, 2009). The element of fashion is often underestimated as an important part of animation. Fashion is often viewed as a purely aesthetic element or superficial decoration; however, fashion actually plays the role of a narrator in animation. In the world of animation, every frame is carefully designed and a character's clothing, color palette, and design elements all play an important role in advancing the narrative. For example, the king wears ornate robes to signify his status and the villain's shadowy costume represents evil intentions (Thomas & Johnston, 1981).

Visual semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings, with a particular focus on the different types of signs and their use in visual media (Chandler, 2022). In animation, the element of fashion is a symbol waiting to be decoded with multiple layers of connotations. For example, a character's tattered cloak may signify poverty, resilience, or a storied past. The theory of visual semiotics reveals the multi- layered meanings of symbols in visual media and helps us to understand fashion elements in animation and their narrative roles more deeply.

Scope of Fashion Elements

In this study, the term 'fashion elements' encompasses not only the clothing and accessories of characters but also the fashion-related aspects of scene design. This includes the use of colors, textures, and styles in the environment, as well as specific decorative elements that contribute to the overall aesthetic and emotional atmosphere. By considering both character design and scene design, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how fashion elements contribute to narrative and character development in animation.

Research Problem

The purpose of this paper is to explore how fashion elements in animation play a narrative role through visual semiotics theory. The specific research questions are as follows:

1) What role do fashion elements in animation play in characterization and plot advancement?
2) How do different fashion choices serve as symbols to convey a character's inner qualities and emotional state?
3) How can visual semiotics theory help decode fashion elements in animation and their deeper symbolism?

Research Objective

The research objectives of this paper aim to deeply analyze and interpret the multi-layered role of fashion elements in animation in the narrative through visual semiotics theory. The specific research objectives are as follows:

1) Analyzes the role that fashion elements in animation play in characterization and plot advancement, revealing their function and importance in animation narratives.
2) Explore how different fashion choices can be used as symbols to convey a character's inner qualities and emotional state, and analyze the symbolic meaning and emotional expression behind these symbols.
3) Utilizing the theory of visual semiotics, we systematically decode the fashion elements in animation and their deep-seated symbolic meanings, providing a new perspective and approach to understanding and interpreting animation works.

LITERATURE REVIEWS
Foundations of Visual Semiotics

Visual semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings in visual media, aiming to decode the cultural and social meanings behind visual signs. The foundational theories of semiotics were developed by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his "Course of General Linguistics," where he introduced the core concepts of semiotics: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the concrete form of visual signs, such as images, colors, shapes, etc., while the signified is the meaning and emotion conveyed by these signs (Saussure, 1916).

Building upon Saussure's work, Roland Barthes extended the theory of semiotics in his work "Principles of Semiotics." Barthes suggested that symbols have not only literal meanings (denotation) but also implied meanings (connotation) (Barthes, 1968). He argued that visual symbols acquire more layers of meaning through cultural and social contexts. For example, a crown literally symbolizes royalty, but its connotation may include notions of power, responsibility, and even loneliness. Through the analysis of visual semiotics, deeper meanings behind these hidden symbols can be revealed.

Barthes also introduced the concept of "cultural symbols," emphasizing the special significance of symbols within specific cultural contexts. Cultural symbols reflect the emotional and psychological states of individuals and also carry social values and historical memories. For instance, a particular garment can have different indexical meanings in different cultures, reflecting each culture's unique social structure and value system (Barthes, The fashion system, 1990).

In addition to Saussure's and Barthes' theories, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory provides a complementary perspective by categorizing signs into three types: icons, indexes, and symbols (Peirce, 1974). Peirce's framework is particularly useful because it addresses different ways in which signs convey meaning. Icons are signs that resemble their referents through similarity, making them easily recognizable due to their direct representation of the object they signify. For example, a portrait of a person functions as an icon because it visually resembles the individual depicted. Indexes, on the other hand, have a direct, causal relationship with their referents, indicating or pointing to something through a physical or factual connection. An example of this would be smoke, which serves as an index of fire because it is directly caused by it. Symbols are signs with meanings that are arbitrarily or culturally assigned. Unlike icons and indexes, symbols depend on social conventions and learned associations to convey their meaning. Language is a prime example of symbolic signs; words derive their meanings from cultural and societal agreements.

The development of semiotics from Saussure to Barthes and Peirce shows a progression from understanding the basic structure of signs to exploring their deeper cultural and contextual meanings. Saussure laid the groundwork with his structuralist approach, focusing on the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Barthes expanded this by emphasizing the importance of cultural and social contexts in shaping the meanings of signs, introducing the ideas of denotation and connotation. Peirce added further depth by categorizing signs into icons, indexes, and symbols, each conveying meaning in different ways.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the complex layers of meaning in visual media. Saussure's focus on the structural relationship between signs, Barthes' exploration of cultural and contextual implications, and Peirce's categorization of signs enhance our understanding of how visual symbols communicate and how their meanings are constructed and interpreted within different cultural contexts.

The application of visual semiotics is not limited to literature and art but extends to a variety of fields such as advertising, film, architecture, and fashion. In advertising, semiotics is used to analyze how advertising images convey messages and influence consumer behavior through visual symbols (Williamson, 1978). In architecture, semiotics helps to interpret how the design

of a building reflects the cultural and historical context (Jencks & Edition, 1995). In fashion, semiotics is used to analyze how clothing and accessories act as symbols to communicate identity, status, and cultural values. All these studies show that visual semiotics is a powerful tool to help us understand the deeper meaning and cultural connotations behind visual symbols.

The Visual Semiotics of Fashion Elements in Animation

Visual semiotics theory has been widely used in animation research, especially in interpreting visual elements in animation. The design of visual elements in animation is an important part of aesthetic expression and an important tool for narrative and emotional expression. As an important part of visual elements in animation works, fashion elements can not only reflect the psychological state, emotional changes and social background of the characters through specific forms such as clothing and accessories; but also through specific decorations, furniture and color use in the scene, fashion elements can convey specific cultural background, social state and emotional atmosphere, adding depth and hierarchy to animation works.

In character design, clothing and accessories are not only visual decorations but also signs that convey a character's personality and social status. Costume design conveys a character's background, emotions, and psychological state through elements such as color, texture, and style as signs (Landis, 2012). Costume design not only enhances the visual appeal of a character Clothing, but also deepens the psychological depiction and narrative effect of the character (Monks, 2009). Costume design is a tool that can be utilized to enhance the visual appeal of a character. Through a semiotic lens, costume design reveals a character's social status and personal traits (Russell, 1973).

Scenography conveys specific emotions and cultural meanings through visual signs of environments and objects (Jia, 2014). For example, forest scenes in animation can convey the theme of ecological protection through rich natural signs, and every element in the forest, such as trees, rivers, and animals, serves as an index of the power and sanctity of nature. These scene designs not only construct the visual aesthetics of the animation but also help the audience better understand and feel the deeper meaning conveyed by the work through the complex sign system.

The use of color, as an important element in costume design and scene design, has a unique symbolic significance. Different colors have different indexical meanings in cultures and can convey the emotional and psychological states of characters. For example, red is often used to indicate danger and passion, while blue conveys calmness and reliability. Color not only affects the visual effect of a character, but also reflects the character's psychological journey and emotional changes through color variations.

The application of fashion elements in animation also involves the dimension of cultural symbols. Clothing and decorations in different cultural contexts have unique symbolic meanings that reflect specific social and cultural values. Scholars Zang and Huang point out that the application of ethnic elements in animation costume design can effectively convey cultural connotations and historical backgrounds (Zang, 2019). Scholar Worasamutprakarn emphasized that the application of Thai cultural inspirations in animation character design not only enhances cultural identity, but also promotes cultural transmission (Worasamutprakarn, 2021, March). Lee's study shows that the relationship between animation content and traditional folk culture can be visualized through costume design (Lee, 2010).

In addition, animation works can also promote the development and transformation of the plot and enrich the layers of the narrative through the matching changes of different costumes of the characters. Research has shown that the importance of costume design in animation lies not only in its visual appeal, but also in its multi-layered role in the narrative. Shi (2022) discusses visual expression in 3D narrative animation, emphasizing the role of costume design in character development and plot advancement (Shi, 2021, December). Yin (2023) points out that costume design plays a key role in characterization in film and television, effectively

conveying a character's social status, personality traits, and emotional changes (Yin, 2023). Green and Brock have also examined the role of character as a driver of narrative, emphasizing how a character's costume directly influences the audience's perceptions and emotional responses to the character through the visual language, which in turn drives storyline development (Green & Brock, 2000).

It can be seen that the visual semiotic significance of fashion elements in animation is multi-level, which not only visually enhances the aesthetic value of the work, but also plays an important role in the narrative and emotional expression. Through the analysis of visual semiotics, we can reveal the deeper meaning behind these fashion elements, deepen our understanding of animation works, and provide animation creators with new creative ideas and methods.

Case Study

In this study, three classic animation works, Mulan, Paradise Kiss and Spirited Away, were chosen as the main cases to analyze the role of fashion elements in narrative in animation. These works have an important position in the field of animation and have had a wide impact in the academic world. By analyzing these works, the semiotic significance of fashion elements in different cultural backgrounds and narrative frameworks can be fully understood. These cases were sampled specifically to align with the research objectives of this study.

Case Selection

Case 1: Mulan

The animated movie "Mulan," produced by Disney in 1998, is adapted from an ancient Chinese legend and tells the story of Hua Mulan, a woman who disguises herself as a man and takes her father's place in the army. Mulan is renowned in the field of animation and has gained worldwide recognition and acclaim for its rich cultural connotations and outstanding visual effects. Academic research on Mulan focuses on its cultural representations, gender roles, and visual symbols. For example, some studies have pointed out the significance of Mulan in terms of East-West cultural convergence, gender role challenges, and visual narratives, as well as conveying the characters' inner conflicts and growth through visual symbols (Wang, 2020) (Chen et al., 2021). In addition, the rich costume designs in Mulan, such as traditional hanfu and military uniforms, are not only visually significant in terms of signs but also convey the character's identity transformation and inner conflict through details.

Case 2: Paradise Kiss

"Paradise Kiss," adapted from the manga of the same name by Ai Yazawa, delves into dreams, love, and growth in the world of fashion and is loved by teenagers and young viewers. By portraying in detail the process of fashion design, the choice of clothing, and the fashion tastes of the characters, the movie not only shows the characters' personalities and emotions but also influences the audience's identification and emotional resonance with the characters to a great extent (Palupy, 2014). Paradise Kiss is therefore ideally suited to be used as a study to understand how fashion can be used as a narrative tool to help portray characters and convey deep-seated emotions and ideas.

Case 3: Spirited Away

Hayao Miyazaki's classic animation "Spirited Away," produced in 2001, is regarded as one of the masterpieces in the history of animation, telling the story of a young girl's growth in a mysterious world. The film won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film and has achieved great commercial success and academic recognition worldwide. Academic studies of Spirited Away cover its rich visual symbolism, deep social metaphors, and themes of personal growth. For example, Spirited Away has had a profound impact in exploring identity, growth, and change, and has been a huge success at the box office, being one of the highest-grossing films in Japanese history (Sanders, 2022). The costumes and set designs in the movie not only

have unique aesthetic value but also express the growth and psychological changes of the characters through subtle visual symbols.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH STEPS

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on visual semiotics to analyze the fashion elements in animation. The main characters in each work—Hua Mulan from "Mulan," Yukari Hayasaka from "Paradise Kiss," and Chihiro from "Spirited Away"—are examined in detail to understand how their costumes and the fashion elements in their environments contribute to their character development and narrative progression.

The research begins with a thorough analysis of the main characters: Hua Mulan, Yukari Hayasaka, and Chihiro. Each character's journey, personality, and growth are scrutinized in the context of their costumes and the visual symbols associated with them. For instance, Hua Mulan's transformation from a traditional woman to a brave warrior is depicted through her changing attire, from hanfu to military uniform, which symbolize her inner conflict and identity transformation. Similarly, Yukari Hayasaka's journey into the fashion world in "Paradise Kiss" is highlighted through her evolving wardrobe, reflecting her emotional growth and personal aspirations. In "Spirited Away," Chihiro's growth is symbolized by her simple work clothes and traditional Japanese attire, indicating her adaptation and maturity in the mystical world.

In addition to character analysis, the study delves into the specific fashion elements used in each animation. This includes examining the traditional hanfu and military uniforms in "Mulan," the high-fashion designs in "Paradise Kiss," and the unique costumes and set designs in "Spirited Away." These elements are not only analyzed for their visual appeal but also for their symbolic meanings and how they enhance the narrative and character development.

Furthermore, the research explores the scenes and environments where these characters are placed. The family home and military camp in "Mulan," the design studio and fashion shows in "Paradise Kiss," and the bathhouse and mystical world in "Spirited Away" are meticulously analyzed. These settings are crucial in understanding the characters' interactions with their environments and how the fashion elements within these settings contribute to the storytelling. By conducting a detailed analysis of the main characters and the fashion elements in each animation, this study aims to uncover the semiotic significance of these elements and how they contribute to the overall narrative and character development. Through this comprehensive approach, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the role of fashion elements in animation and their impact on visual storytelling.

SPECIFIC CASE STUDIES AND DISCUSSIONS

Case 1: The Role of Fashion Elements in Characterization and Plot Advancement - Mulan
Mulan, an animated movie produced by Disney in 1998, is based on an ancient Chinese legend that tells the story of Hua Mulan, a woman who disguises herself as a man and takes her father's place in the army. The movie blends the traditional elements of Eastern culture with Western narrative, and through the growth of Hua Mulan, it shows her struggle and exploration between family responsibilities and personal pursuits. Through the fashionable elements in costume and scene design, the movie utilizes the theory of visual semiotics to profoundly portray the characters and promote the plot development.

1) The Role of Fashion Elements in Costume on Characterization and Plot Advancement
In the opening scene of the film, Hua Mulan wears a typical hanfu, whose detailed embroidery, traditional cut, and soft colors convey her identity and social expectations as a traditional woman. According to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, the hanfu serves as a signifier with its signified being Mulan's traditional female identity and the social expectations placed upon her. Roland Barthes' concept of denotation and connotation further explain that the

detailed embroidery and traditional cut denote her cultural heritage, while the connotation reveals the societal pressures and familial obligations she faces.

As the plot develops, Hua Mulan decides to take her father's place in the army and wears a soldier's outfit. This attire, with its dark tones and sturdy materials, serves as a symbol of her redefinition of self-identity and her challenge to social norms, as described by Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. The practical design, dark color palette, and robust materials denote the functionality and practicality required in a military setting, while the connotation represents her inner strength and determination. Specifically, when Hua Mulan wears the soldier's outfit, the battle armor, sword, and simple hairstyle become new visual icons. The hard lines and dark tones of the armor symbolize her courageous, tough personality and her commitment to family responsibilities. These signs convey Mulan's journey from a submissive daughter to a brave warrior through the implied meaning of visual semiotics.

2) The role of fashion elements in scenes for characterization and plot advancement

In addition to the costumes, the scene design in the movie also plays a similarly deep symbolic role. The scene design of Hua Mulan's home, with its flowers and trees in the courtyard, traditional decorations, and furniture, serves as indexes that indicate the warmth and constraints of a traditional family. These scenes denote the traditional family environment in which Hua Mulan lives, while their connotation reveals the pressure of her family responsibilities and social expectations.

After she decides to take her father's place in the army, the scene design of the movie shifts from the family to the military camp and the battlefield. The simple tents in the barracks, the serious atmosphere of the training ground, and the brutal environment of the battlefield serve as indexes that symbolize the harshness and challenges of military life. These scenes denote military discipline and the life of a warrior, while their connotation reveals Hua Mulan's adaptation and redefinition of her self-identity in the barracks. The broken armor, desolate battlefield, and tense atmosphere on the battlefield further symbolize the cruelty of war and Hua Mulan's inner determination. Through their delicate visual signs, these scene designs not only enrich the visual level of the movie, but also profoundly influence the character development and plot advancement. The contrast between the family scenes and the military camp scenes demonstrates the process of Hua Mulan's growth from a girl bound by a traditional family to a brave warrior. This contrast reveals Hua Mulan's growth and change in different environments through the implied meaning of visual semiotics, enabling the audience to understand and empathize with her growth in a deeper way.

The semiotic decoding of fashion elements in Mulan reveals the important role of these elements in characterization and plot advancement. Mulan's costume and scene design not only serve as visual signs to convey her identity and psychological state but also reveal her growth in different cultural contexts through the intermingling of cultural signs. The transformation between Hanfu and soldier's costume demonstrates her identity change from a traditional woman to a brave warrior, while the contrast between the traditional scenes at home and the harsh environment of the military camp highlights her growth and change in different environments. These symbols not only enrich the external image of the character, but also profoundly reveal the inner changes and emotional depth of the character through the layers of hidden meanings, providing the audience with a new way of understanding and empathy.

Case 2: The Role of the Symbolic Meaning of Fashion Elements in Emotional and Cultural Expression - Paradise Kiss

Based on the manga of the same name by Ai Yazawa, "Paradise Kiss" tells the story of a high school girl Yukari Hayasaka, who, while preparing for her university exams, meets the fashion design team Paradise Kiss, led by chief designer George Koizumi. Encouraged by the team members, she becomes a model and begins her journey in the fashion industry.

1) The symbolism of fashion elements in clothing for emotional expression

At the beginning of the movie, Yukari Hayasaka wears an ordinary school uniform and simple everyday outfits, which convey her ordinariness and uncertainty about her future. According to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, the school uniform serves as a signifier with its signified being Yukari's role as an ordinary student and her societal expectations. Roland Barthes' concept of denotation and connotation further explain that the neat but featureless uniform denotes her identity as a student, while the connotation reveals her uncertainty about her future.

As Yukari enters the fashion world, her outfits become bolder and more individualistic. This change is highlighted when she begins to wear strongly designed clothing with bright colors and edgy styles. According to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, these new outfits serve as symbols of her inner growth and increased self-confidence. Specifically, when Yukari wears a high-fashion gown designed by George Koizumi, the gown's ornate design and delicate cut become visual icons. The gown's intricate design and bright colors denote high fashion and sophistication, while their connotation represents Yukari's acceptance of her self-identity and pursuit of her dreams. For example, at an important fashion show, Yukari wears a bright red dress. The bright color and intricate cut of the dress denote her elevated status in the fashion world, while its connotation symbolizes her inner passion and firm belief in the future. This scene not only demonstrates her elevated status in the fashion world but also reflects her inner confidence and strength

2) The symbolism of fashion elements in the scene in cultural expression

The use of fashion elements in "Paradise Kiss" not only reveals the inner world of the characters but also shows the uniqueness and diversity of Japanese fashion culture through specific scene designs. The decorative style of the design studio and the layout of the exhibition venue serve as indexes indicating an environment full of creativity and vitality. According to Roland Barthes' theory, the detailed design elements such as clothing design drawings, sewing tools, and fabric samples denote the fashion studio, while their connotation reveals the designers' passion for artistic creation and their relentless pursuit of perfection and innovation.

Specifically, the studio's design style combines modern fashion elements with Japanese traditional culture, such as Japanese-style wall paintings and tatami-mat flooring. These elements not only denote the cultural fusion within the studio but also connote the designers' respect for Japanese culture and their courageous pursuit of modern innovation. This combination demonstrates the inclusiveness and diversity of Japanese fashion culture and reveals through visual symbols the characters' thinking and fusion of tradition and modernity in their creative process.

In the fashion show scenes, the ornate display venue, elaborate lighting, and avant-garde stage design serve as indexes that indicate the atmosphere of a high-profile fashion event. The garments displayed at the fashion show feature bold modern designs combined with traditional kimono elements. According to Peirce's theory, these garments serve as symbols of the unique position of Japanese fashion culture in the global fashion world. The intricate designs and traditional elements denote the cultural richness of the garments, while their connotation showcases the designers' ability to blend modernity with tradition, creating visually and culturally impactful fashion signs.

The fashion elements in the scenes of the design studio and fashion shows not only enhance the visual effect of the movie but also deepen the emotional and psychological state of the characters through delicate visual symbols. These scene designs demonstrate the richness and diversity of Japanese fashion culture by combining modern and traditional design styles. These scenes not only give the audience a strong visual impact but also reveal the inner world and cultural background of the characters through their denotation and connotation, enabling the audience to understand and empathize with the characters' growth and changes in a deeper way.

Case 3: Visual Semiotics Decoding the Deeper Symbolism of Fashion Elements - Spirited Away

Spirited Away is a classic animated movie produced by Hayao Miyazaki in 2001 about a young girl Chihiro who grows up in a mysterious world. The movie expresses profound themes of social and personal growth through rich visual symbols and metaphors. The story begins with Chihiro moving with her parents into a mysterious world where her parents are turned into pigs while Chihiro grows up in this world and finds her way back home. The film has been loved and recognized by audiences around the world for its delicate style and deep emotional portrayal.

1) Interpretation of Fashion Elements in Costumes for Deeper Symbolism of Characters

According to visual semiotics theory, especially the combined perspectives of Roland Barthes' concepts of denotation and connotation and Charles Sanders Peirce's categorization of signs into icons, indexes, and symbols, the fashion elements in "Spirited Away" reflect this theoretical framework.

At the beginning of the movie, Chihiro wears ordinary modern clothes, including a simple T-shirt and shorts. These outfits serve as indexes, indicating her ordinariness and unfamiliarity with her new environment. According to Barthes' theory, the denotation of Chihiro's modern clothing is her everyday dress, while the connotation reveals her ordinariness and fear of the unknown. This choice of clothing reflects her confusion and insecurity as she enters the mysterious world.

As the plot develops, Chihiro changes into simple and plain overalls when she works at the bathhouse. This kind of work clothes serves as a new index, including the simple, plain design and practical materials, referring to her adaptation and growth in the new environment. Through Barthes's concepts of "denotation" and "connotation," the denotation of the overalls is their functionality and practicality, while the connotation reveals Chihiro's growth and maturity. The change of the overalls not only symbolizes her growth from a young girl dependent on her parents to an independent and self-reliant girl but also reflects her psychological change as she gradually assumes responsibility and faces challenges bravely.

In addition, some of the small accessories Chihiro wears in the film, such as the hair tie given by Zeniba, are not only decorative but also symbolize her nostalgia and perseverance for her family and her past life. The hair tie serves as an icon, indicating its practical use, while its connotation symbolizes Chihiro's inner attachment to her family and her emotional support

2) The deeper symbolism of fashion elements in the scene in cultural expression

In addition to the costumes, the set design in the movie also plays a deep sign role. For example, the bathhouse scene in the movie creates a mysterious and oppressive atmosphere through its elaborate decorations and traditional Japanese architectural style. These scene designs serve as indexes to indicate the authority and control of Yubaba, while their connotations reveal the challenges and inner oppression Chihiro faces. Through these visual signs, the movie not only shows the external environment of the characters but also deeply reveals their inner world and emotional changes.

Another notable scene is the process of Chihiro traveling through the tunnel into the mysterious world. The design of this scene not only shows the transformation of space but also implies the transformation of Chihiro's psychology and identity. The tunnel serves as an index, representing the passage to the unknown world, while its connotation symbolizes Chihiro's transition from the real world to a new environment that requires her to grow and face challenges.

Through the use of these fashion elements in costume and set design, Miyazaki not only tells a coming-of-age story but also profoundly reveals the character's inner psychological changes and emotional growth through visual semiotics. The changes in Chihiro's costumes, especially from modern clothes to traditional overalls and Japanese-style clothes, symbolize her growth

from a confused and helpless little girl to a tough and courageous character. The set design further reinforces the emotional and psychological changes in this growing process through subtle visual symbols.

These deep signs, analyzed through both Barthes' concepts of "denotation" and "connotation" and Peirce's categories of "icons", "indexes" and "symbols", reveal Chihiro's growth in different environments, enabling the audience to understand and empathize with her growth and change more deeply.

Chihiro's modern clothes, work clothes, and traditional Japanese clothes are not just mere clothing choices; they serve as visual indexes carrying the character's growth trajectory and psychological changes. The denotation of the modern clothes reveals her confusion and uneasiness when she first enters the mysterious world, the denotation of the work clothes shows her adaptation and growth in the new environment, and the connotation of the traditional Japanese clothes deeply signifies her firmness and maturity when she finally faces the challenges.

The set design further reveals the character's inner world and emotional state through elaborate decorations and spatial transformations. Through the semiotic decoding of the fashion elements in "Spirited Away," it can be seen that the combined theories of Barthes and Peirce are powerful in revealing the inner world and emotional state of the characters. These symbols not only enrich the external image of the characters but also profoundly reveal the inner changes and emotional depth of the characters through the layers of denotations and connotations, providing the audience with a new way of understanding and empathy.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS
Conclusion
This study analyzed three classic animated works—Mulan, Paradise Kiss, and Spirited Away—to explore the narrative role of fashion elements in animation, particularly how they convey complex cultural and emotional meanings through visual semiotics.

In Mulan, fashion elements such as traditional Hanfu and soldier uniforms visually symbolize the character's identity transformation and psychological growth. The intricate embroidery and traditional tailoring of the Hanfu represent Mulan's traditional female identity and societal expectations, while the simple, practical soldier uniform symbolizes her redefinition of self and challenge to social norms. These costume designs enrich the visual portrayal of the character and reveal Mulan's struggle between familial duty and personal ambition. Additionally, the scene design plays a significant symbolic role; the traditional family home with its ornamental flowers and decorations represents warmth and constraints, while the austere military camps and battlefields symbolize the harshness of military life and Mulan's development.

In Paradise Kiss, fashion elements extend beyond mere aesthetics to reflect the characters' inner worlds and emotional states. Yukari's transition from ordinary school uniforms to fashion-forward designs demonstrates her growth in the fashion world and gradual self-acceptance and maturity. The fashion shows and design studio scenes, blending modern fashion with traditional Japanese cultural elements, highlight the characters' passion for artistic creation and their relentless pursuit of perfection and innovation. These scenes not only create a rich fashion atmosphere but also reveal the characters' inner worlds and cultural backgrounds through visual symbols.

In Spirited Away, Chihiro's clothing and accessories change throughout the story, symbolizing her growth from a dependent child to a self-reliant individual. The intricate designs of the bathhouse and traditional architecture create a mysterious and oppressive atmosphere, reflecting Chihiro's challenges and inner turmoil. The tunnel scene, with its spatial transformation, symbolizes Chihiro's psychological and identity shifts, further enhancing the narrative depth of the film.

Overall, these three cases illustrate that fashion elements in animation are not merely decorative but play a crucial role in narrative development. They utilize visual semiotics to convey characters' identities, psychological states, and emotional changes, thereby helping viewers understand and empathize with the characters more deeply. Furthermore, fashion elements reflect the unique cultural and social backgrounds of different settings, enriching the cultural depth and visual appeal of the works. By employing a multi-layered semiotic approach, fashion elements in animation hold multiple meanings, driving the plot and enriching the characters' internal traits and emotional expressions. These conclusions provide valuable insights for animation creation and offer new perspectives and methodologies for animation research.

Future Research Directions

Future research can delve deeper into several areas. Firstly, it can include a broader selection of animated works from different periods and cultural backgrounds to conduct cross-cultural comparisons and explore the diversity and commonality of fashion elements globally. Secondly, as animation technology advances, the expression of fashion elements also evolves. Future research could focus on how new technologies (e.g., 3D modeling, virtual reality) impact the expression of fashion elements in animation, exploring how technological advancements can enrich and expand the semiotic significance of fashion elements. Additionally, combining disciplines such as fashion studies, semiotics, animation studies, and cultural studies can provide a multi-faceted, multi-layered, comprehensive understanding of the complexity and depth of fashion elements in animation. Lastly, applying visual semiotics to animation education can help students understand and utilize fashion elements to enhance narrative effects, improving their creative abilities and theoretical knowledge. By exploring these future research directions, a deeper understanding of fashion elements in animation can be achieved, expanding the application of visual semiotics in animation research and providing new perspectives and methods for animation creation and theoretical research.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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