

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Animation should not be understood merely as a technical medium consisting of moving images, but as a cultural form of storytelling through which meaning, values, and emotions are constructed and interpreted. As a multimodal text, animation combines visual design, movement, sound, and narrative meaning to communicate ideas that reflect contemporary cultural experiences. In this sense, animation functions similarly to literary texts, as both construct meaning through symbolic representation and invite interpretation from audiences.

Within contemporary media culture, mainstream animation produced by major studios such as Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks continues to occupy a dominant position in the global animation industry through extensive theatrical distribution, international marketing, and cross-media franchises (Westcott, 2011). According to Wells (2013), mainstream animation commonly emphasizes continuity, coherence, and clearly structured progression in its storytelling. These conventions guide audiences toward stable interpretations and reinforce familiar storytelling expectations. Such patterns can be understood as part of dominant cultural narratives that prioritize accessibility and emotional clarity. 

In contrast, independent animation has developed as an alternative space of cultural expression that allows for greater artistic and creative freedom outside large-scale studio systems. Mitchell (2023) explains that independent animation enables creators to exercise stronger personal authorship and creative control over their works. Within this context, independent animated films may employ less conventional storytelling approaches that allow meaning to remain more open and interpretive. Instead of directing audiences toward a single fixed understanding,

these narratives often encourage viewers to participate more actively in constructing meaning.

Recent animated works such as *Elio* (2025) and *Flow* (2024) demonstrate this contrast. While *Elio* follows a structured narrative emphasizing emotional development and resolution, *Flow* presents a dialogue-free and atmospheric narrative that relies more heavily on visual interpretation. These comparisons show that animation can construct narrative meaning through different storytelling approaches.

Although animation has been widely discussed in previous studies, much of the existing research emphasizes different aspects of the medium. Wells (2013) examines animation primarily through its artistic characteristics and narrative traditions, while Furniss (1998) discusses animation from the perspective of visual aesthetics and animation as an art form. From an industrial perspective, Westcott (2011) explores the global animation industry, and Mitchell (2023) focuses on the development and production of independent animation. In addition, Ruslan (2019) examines independent animation in relation to meaning and identity construction. Although these studies contribute to a broader understanding of animation as an artistic, industrial, and art form, they provide limited discussion of how narrative meaning is constructed differently in mainstream and independent animation through multimodal visual resources. Likewise, relatively little attention has been given to how different narrative conventions influence the interpretation of narrative meaning within contemporary animated films.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), meaning is constructed through multiple semiotic resources rather than language alone. Visual representation, composition, and interaction work together to communicate meaning and shape audiences' interpretation. Since animation relies primarily on visual and audiovisual communication, examining how these multimodal resources construct narrative meaning is essential for understanding how animated stories communicate emotion, relationships, and narrative progression.

To address this gap, this study applies Multimodal Discourse Analysis, particularly Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) Visual Grammar, because the framework provides analytical tools for examining how meaning is constructed through representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. These three dimensions make it possible to examine not only what is visually represented, but also how visual elements organize narrative progression and guide audience interpretation. Through this framework, this study examines how narrative meaning is constructed and interpreted in both films, and how independent animation narratives redefine mainstream narrative conventions through the construction of narrative meaning.



1.2 Research Questions

Based on the objectives of this study, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How are narrative conventions and their resultant narrative meanings constructed in *Elio* (2025) as a mainstream animation and *Flow* (2024) as an independent animation?
2. How does *Flow* (2024), as an independent animation, redefine the narrative conventions and their resultant narrative meanings constructed in *Elio* (2025) as a mainstream animation?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how narrative meaning is constructed and interpreted in contemporary animation through a multimodal perspective by focusing on twelve selected scenes from a mainstream animated film (*Elio*, 2025) and twelve selected scenes from an independent animated film (*Flow*, 2024), which makes a total of twenty-four scenes.

This study investigates how narrative meaning is constructed in mainstream and independent animation through multimodal elements. The study compares how narrative meaning is constructed across the two films and examines how independent animation narratives redefine mainstream narrative conventions within contemporary storytelling practices.

To achieve this, the study applies Multimodal Discourse Analysis, particularly Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar, to examine how narrative meaning and narrative conventions are constructed and interpreted through visual and audiovisual elements functioning as meaning-making resources within the narrative. Rather than focusing on technical aspects of cinematography, the analysis emphasizes how multimodal elements contribute to storytelling and interpretation.

In conclusion, this research aims to contribute to cultural studies by positioning animation as a multimodal narrative text through which narrative meaning is constructed and interpreted. It also highlights independent animation as a narrative practice that offers alternative storytelling approaches beyond dominant conventions.

1.4 Limitation of the Study

This study focuses on two selected animated films, *Elio* (2025) as a representation of mainstream studio animation and *Flow* (2024) as a representation of independent animation. These films are selected as case studies to examine how narrative meaning is constructed and interpreted within different cultural and production contexts.

As this research is situated within the field of English Literature, particularly cultural studies, animation is approached as a multimodal narrative text rather than a technical medium. Therefore, the analysis does not examine animation techniques in detail, but focuses on how meaning is constructed through narrative and visual representation.

This study does not aim to represent the animation industry as a whole. Instead, it prioritizes interpretive depth by examining twelve selected scenes from each film. The scenes are selected using purposive criteria, focusing on moments that represent key narrative developments, emotional expression, and narrative interpretation.

The selection of twenty-four scenes provides a focused dataset for examining how narrative meaning is constructed and interpreted without reducing the analysis to general observations. The selected scenes collectively represent the overall narrative progression of each film, including the introduction, development, climax, and resolution, while capturing the major emotional and narrative shifts relevant to the research objectives. As the scenes encompass the key stages of narrative development in both films, they were considered sufficient to address the

research questions and support an in-depth analysis of narrative meaning through the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions. This approach aligns with the study's focus on how independent animation narratives redefine dominant narrative conventions through alternative storytelling practices.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to cultural studies by examining animation as a narrative form through which meaning is constructed and interpreted. By applying Multimodal Discourse Analysis, this research offers an approach to understanding how narrative meaning and cultural representation are shaped within animated texts.

Academically, this research bridges literary studies, narrative theory, and multimodal discourse analysis by demonstrating how visual and audiovisual elements contribute to meaning-making in ways comparable to language in literary texts. It also contributes to broader discussions of contemporary storytelling by highlighting how independent animation introduces alternative narrative forms that redefine dominant narrative conventions and the construction of narrative meaning.

Practically, this study may benefit students, educators, and researchers by providing an analytical framework for interpreting animation as a narrative text. It also encourages a broader understanding of animation as not only entertainment but also a meaningful medium of cultural expression.

1.6 State of the Art

Previous studies have examined animation primarily as an artistic, industrial, and aesthetic medium. Scholars such as Wells (2013) and Furniss (1998) discuss how mainstream animation develops recognizable storytelling conventions, often characterized by continuity, emotional clarity, and structured narrative progression. These approaches highlight how mainstream studio animation relies on stable narrative forms designed to ensure accessibility and audience engagement.

However, these studies tend to focus more on industrial production and aesthetic development, with less attention given to how narrative meaning is constructed and interpreted through storytelling conventions in animation.

Research on independent animation has similarly focused on aspects of creative autonomy, production processes, and artistic experimentation. Ruslan (2019) frames independent animation as a form of identity expression shaped by personal authorship, while Mitchell (2023) shows how independent production environments allow for creative decisions outside corporate systems. Buchan (2013) further notes how digital platforms enable independent animation to circulate globally beyond traditional industrial structures. Although these studies provide valuable insights, their focus remains largely on production and stylistic experimentation, while narrative meaning remains less explored.

Despite these contributions, there is still limited research that examines how narrative conventions are constructed through multimodal meaning-making in animation as a cultural text. Existing work often prioritizes historical, stylistic, or industrial perspectives, creating a gap in understanding how visual and audiovisual elements contribute to the construction of narrative conventions and the interpretation of their resultant narrative meaning. As a result, independent animation is frequently framed as stylistic experimentation rather than as a narrative practice capable of redefining dominant storytelling conventions.

To address this gap, this study applies Multimodal Discourse Analysis, particularly Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar, to examine how narrative conventions are constructed through representational and compositional elements, and how these conventions shape narrative meaning and interpretation. By focusing on selected mainstream and independent animated works, this research positions animation as a multimodal narrative text and contributes to cultural and literary studies by highlighting how independent animation offers alternative narrative conventions beyond dominant storytelling practices.