

# STORYTELLING CULTURAL HYBRIDITY: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN REPRESENTATION IN RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes cultural hybridity in Southeast Asian animated narratives through an analysis of the film *Raya and the Last Dragon*. Structural narrative analysis and visual semiotics techniques are used to evaluate how this film conveys a Southeast Asian identity perspective to audiences outside the region. The film analysis uses Claude Lévi-Strauss' binary opposition framework to reveal the cultural tensions between trust and betrayal, as well as unity and fragmentation that repeatedly appear in the text. The film's visual design combines various Southeast Asian cultural elements into a unique and integrated image, including architectural design, weapons, magical creatures, and costume styles. This paper uses narrative theory and visual cultural analysis to study transnational animation that presents cultural pride and ideology through an interdisciplinary methodology

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## 1. Introduction

Animated films are providing crucial entry ways to disseminate social values in the contemporary global media landscape where they act as entertainment and transmission modes of cultural values. By its very presence as a medium, animation has started to play an important role in reshaping the understanding of the world and the culture of others among audiences. Consequently, animated storytelling finds room to stand in the cultural industries where identity, tradition, and modernity are rethought (Wells, 2002).

This presents the complex dynamics of globalization in which cultural elements from different corners of the globe is hybridised, revised and changed into a global audience. In Bhabha's (1994) cultural hybridity, the space between cultural meaning, is theorised as the "third space" where the cultural identities are formed, which neither make up entirely new ones nor entirely borrowed. Using media narratives both to represent and to produce culture, objective integrates the media narrative as a form that constitutes more than a container for representation (Hall, 2019).

In this framework, Southeast Asia, a region with such plurality of cultures, historical syncretism and artistic heritage, has become increasingly appealing source of inspiration for global media productions. However, the region is oftentimes given generalized or essentialized

representations that level details of cultural complexities to provide marketable aesthetics (Tiongson, 2019). The question is whether and how popular media, and in particular animation, narrates Southeast Asia, especially in a distorted or authentic way, or whether it merely reflects global consumption.

In this study, it examines how the film constructs Southeast Asian narratives through cultural hybridity. The research uses Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural narrative analysis (1963) to discover the cryptic binary oppositions in the film's storyline and interpret how these narrative structures are symptomatic of Southeast Asian societies' cultural values, tensions and aspirations. Binary oppositions, that is tradition versus modernity, trust versus betrayal, wholeness versus fragmentation are a crucial analytical framework for the decoding of the cultural meaning of the film.

By putting the film in context of this broader discussion of visual culture and Digital Media Arts, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on types of identity formation, symbolism, and power of global animation studios in the creation of cultural narratives (Lister et al., 2009; Kristiyono & Ida, 2019). While digital media art is a contemporary form of visual communication, it is not only a carrier of the narration, but a dynamic carrier of cultural imaginary on which cultural imaginaries are visualised and contested. Talking about this issue, animation can be an effective dissemination and transformation of cultural values.

It emerges, immediately, as a worthwhile research question in how worldwide media representations shape the cultural presence as well as identity dynamics in Southeast Asian communities. To comprehend the emergence of the digital device as a central artistic medium, it is necessary to comprehend cultural visualization and circulation methods. The use of wrong information or using overly simple versions in mainstream media tends to create stereotypical ideas that block meaningful cultural exchanges between different groups (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Through knowledgeable and well-informed representation societies can achieve better empathy combined with increased diversity and better mutual respect.

The study serves to fulfil academic objectives for de-Westernizing cultural analysis by focusing on narratives and imagery that run against Western cultural standards (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Smith II, 2022). Research involving the critically analysed Disney movie *Raya and the Last Dragon* creates an academic space to explore global cultural flows against Southeast Asian cultural expressions and their implications for global audiences.

The study is also relevant for scholars, educators, and media practitioners working with intercultural literacy because it offers a standard to assess media texts that claim to present non-Western identities critically. The research results can help build better media production practices focused on inclusive representations while cultural sensitivity during future development processes while prompting producers to collaborate with communities and experts (Kristiyono & Ida, 2020; Smith, 2016).

As will be discussed in this article, this is also an important problem in cultural studies and media research more generally: With visual media, which is a site of cultural dialogue, can it also be a tool of cultural essentialism? Through the critical analysis of the film's visual codes, narrative structure, and symbolic motifs, it become possible to explore the ways in which meaning is made, and how digital animation functions as a cultural form of negotiation.

Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to fill in the gaps on how cues of cultural difference in global animation are mediated through numerous narrative forces—not simply as a reflection of cultural diversity but as a narrative force to shape collective memory and cultural imagination. Combining structural narrative and visual hybridity to regard *Raya and*

the Last Dragon, this paper shares how these and related approaches to representing representation, voice, and cultural authenticity can further that larger project of remaking representation, voice and authenticity in global media.

Although the film was released in 2021, its cultural impact continues in 2024 and beyond. Used as a teaching tool in universities and frequently referenced in discussions of cultural representation, *Raya and the Last Dragon* remains relevant. As Southeast Asian imagery becomes more visible in global media, critical examination of how that imagery is constructed becomes essential.

Many universities across the world use the film as a teaching instrument for their media studies, visual culture, and Asian studies programs. The film often becomes a teaching tool to help students grasp how producers of global media should handle intercultural representation and self-identity. Our analysis today of this film serves as vital and up-to-date insight into how different cultures are depicted in international productions.

### **Narrative Structure and Cultural Representation**

In 1963 Claude Lévi-Strauss became the first scholar to use structural analysis to examine cultural stories and myths by finding how these tales repeat basic opposing ideas. After Lévi-Strauss's discovery people who study film and media apply his approach to examine how conflicts in narratives reflect cultural values (Berger, 1995). The system of competing values such as conflict-resolution tools and character setups enables cultural impact in stories. Hall (1997) highlights that structural narrative analysis is effective for showing how elements like cultural identity form moral conflicts about tradition versus technology or group versus individual forces in Southeast Asian media concepts.

Stam et al. (1992) and Chatman (1978) argue that academic scholars see narratives as platforms to spread and normalize social norms. Animated movies normally follow mythological and basic plot patterns which create this impact. According to Lévi-Strauss, the purpose of myths is not just to provide entertainment but also to reconcile conflicts within a civilization's worldview. In the context of *Raya and the Last Dragon*, analyzing the way narrative oppositions are framed, such as "Unity versus Split," "Tradition versus Modernity," "Trust versus Suspicion," "Human versus Nature," and "Heroism versus Betrayal," enables us to gain a better understanding of the ideological foundations of Southeast Asian identity as they are portrayed in a global media format. Scholars can trace how moral and cultural values are integrated within narrative arcs through such structural frameworks, which provide a lens through which to approach the study of cultural mediation in popular storytelling.

During several years scholars analysed how existing narrative systems should work when telling diverse stories. The modern trend of worldwide storytelling demands movies to express local themes within their universal plotting structures. Successful animated films use recognizable character types to hide their actual historical origins. Many storytelling practices in Southeast Asia especially shadow puppetry highlight how groups evolve as a whole instead of highlighting individual growth through oral epic cycles and sacred rituals. *Raya and the Last Dragon* tells its story through gentle shifts that move away from hero themes to emphasize restoration of relationships. This is a step that undermines the prevalent Western plot trajectories.

Furthermore, moral dichotomies within the narrative, particularly the contrast between trust and treachery, are reminiscent of Southeast Asian folktales, in which the disruption of societal order is the primary cause of conflict. These opposite forces function as

both storytelling tools and story drivers that show background political changes in the area. Through this recognized story structure the film allows viewers globally to experience regional suffering and hope. The system lets viewers take part from different cultures yet relishes local context at the same time.

### **Cultural Hybridity and Identity in Global Media**

Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity draws attention to establishing a "third space" in which interactions between people of different cultures form new identities. It is via the facilitation of this third sector that hybrid cultural manifestations can emerge. These manifestations are not solely associated with one particular tradition but represent a synthesis of several influences. Global media commodities now control this domain since they integrate visual design and cultural material from many nations into their products. To create a shared yet imagined environment *Raya and The Last Dragon* merges various Southeast Asian cultural elements in its production.

Researchers Kristiyono and Ida (2019, 2020) argue that visual culture and digital media art serve as dynamic platforms for identity negotiation in the digital era. Media producers create hybrid cultural forms by remixing and reinterpreting symbols to communicate with audiences on a global scale and in their immediate vicinity. Waisbord and Mellado found in 2014 that cultural hybrid projects work for either controlling messages or liberating non-Western artistic perspectives based on their development purposes. According to this idea hybridity serves as a two-sided tool that permits diversity display while concealing power imbalances during global cultural production. Looking at how hybridity shows up in *Raya and the Last Dragon's* visuals and storytelling will show viewers how media formats affect our beliefs as well as help them understand Southeast Asian identity presentation.

Cultural hybridity serves as a strategic approach to beauty and essential business aspect in our storytelling digital platforms. Transnational media productions create better ways to reach their worldwide audiences through mixtures of different cultural elements. This approach frequently results in the "packaging" of culture through the chosen amalgamation of different elements. Using *Kumandra* as an example, *Raya and the Last Dragon* displays this method by incorporating cultural symbols from Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines into a cohesive yet fictional construct. Through regional cooperation the nations can establish stronger bonds among themselves although harmonizing multiple identities can weaken specific regional identities (Kristiyono, 2022).

Cultural hybridity has to be understood in terms of power relations which are not evenly distributed. Western production paradigms frequently influence the transfer of representation from the Global South to the Global North between the two regions. Even though Southeast Asian themes significantly impact the film's visual and narrative structure, most of the picture adheres to Disney's established traditions regarding pacing, character development, and emotional resonance. These circumstances give rise to questions concerning the individuals who possess creative control over cultural narratives and the perspectives that are either privileged or disadvantaged due to the process. Consequently, hybridity in this situation changes into a creative fusion and a locus of ideological struggle.

Research examines how Southeast Asian cultural elements appear in global media regulation and scientific publications. Aryani et al. (2021) studied how the Peh Cun tradition appeared in an animated short film that aimed to preserve Indonesian youth cultural heritage. Saba and Setiawan (2022) analysed *Raya and the Last Dragon* while observing that it featured

Southeast Asian iconography which contained cultural aesthetics together with reductionist representations. The Indonesian cultural context of digital art exhibitions serves to mediate cultural resistance and identity politics according to Kristiyono (2022).

**Table 1 : Summary of Previous Research**

Author(s) & Year	Focus of Study	Object/Context	Method	Key Findings
Aryani et al. (2021)	Cultural transmission through animation	Peh Cun animated short film	Design-based research	Animation can preserve and revitalize traditional festivals
Sutanto (2022)	Visual representation of Southeast Asian identity	<i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i>	Visual culture analysis	The film uses generalized cultural visuals that risk essentialism
Saba & Setiawan (2022)	Cultural motifs and hybridity	<i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i>	Semiotic analysis	Iconography draws from various Southeast Asian sources
Kristiyono & Ida (2019)	Digital ethnomethodology in media culture	Online digital art in Indonesia	Ethnographic method	Digital art mediates cultural identity in participatory ways
Kristiyono (2022)	Cultural resistance in contemporary art	East Java Biennale	Narrative and critical discourse	Art communities use digital media to challenge dominant narratives

Previous studies on *Raya and the Last Dragon* (see table 1) have largely focused on either visual iconography or narrative archetypes in isolation. This paper introduces an integrated analytical model that merges Lévi-Strauss's structuralist narrative theory to decode cultural hybridity in animated storytelling.

## 2. Method

The investigative method in this research uses qualitative approaches to study the animated feature *Raya and the Last Dragon*. This research combines structural narrative analysis methods with visual semiotic analysis for studying cultural hybridity development. This cultural artifact serves as a communication channel that uses visual elements for understanding the cultural heritage of Southeast Asians while operating in worldwide media platforms.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Narrative Analysis Framework

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) structure is the central tenet in structuralistic analysis of myth and story; the main framework for narrative analysis as applied to narratives is adapted from his theory of structuralism based on binary opposition. Drawing from this approach, the implication is that myths throughout cultures are governed by universal structures and oppositions such as good versus evil, nature versus culture, and trust versus betrayal. The film's plot, characters, and moral conflicts are identified in this study as such oppositions, and underlying cultural tensions and values which reflect Southeast Asian social dynamic

The process entails breaking down the narrative into exposing, conflict, climax, and resolution stages. Recurring thematic binaries are extracted from within these stages and categorized. Then, each binary is studied in terms of Southeast Asian cultural norms, historical values, and contemporary issues, and in terms of how the film mediates such elements for a global audience.

#### Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The film *Raya and the Last Dragon* was selected purposively as the primary object of analysis due to its explicit representation of Southeast Asian-inspired cultural elements in both narrative and visual design. The research was conducted in five stages:

1. **Repeated Viewing:** The film was watched multiple times to gain familiarity with plot details, character development, visual motifs, and cultural references.
2. **Scene Segmentation:** Key scenes were selected based on narrative turning points and visual richness. These scenes served as units of analysis.
3. **Binary Coding:** Using structural narrative analysis, oppositional themes were extracted and categorized.
4. **Visual Mapping:** Visual elements were systematically documented, described, and categorized using semiotic descriptors.
5. **Interpretation and Contextualization:** Analytical findings were interpreted with reference to cultural theories and Southeast Asian cultural frameworks.

This dual-method approach allows the research to account for what the film says through its narrative and how it says it through visual storytelling. It ensures a holistic understanding of how Southeast Asian cultural hybridity is constructed, negotiated, and communicated in a globally circulated animated film. Lévi-Strauss's structural narrative approach was chosen for its ability to uncover a narrative's deep structure by identifying binary oppositions. This method allows researchers to understand how different cultural elements are integrated and represented in stories, as well as how cultural acculturation occurs in the context of digital media, such as animated films.

The film features *Raya* as a new version of Southeast Asian heroines exhibiting toughness on one hand and strong communication skills on top of mindfulness toward spiritual guidance. Her experiences demonstrate the difficulties of tribal alliances combined with feminine leadership standards. She makes her choices based on ethical standards which result from what her community remembers and what scars her ancestors left behind. The film shows *Raya's* moral choices make her a more realistic character and boosts the importance of female leads in Southeast Asian production.

The conflict pattern Namaari shares with Raya needs further analysis. Their changing relationship represents the natural division of one historic people into separate nations because of political differences. Even though Namaari plays a key part in Raya's journey she transforms from an acquaintance into her opposite just as Raya develops her own doubts. The relationship between Raya and Namaari shows postcolonial conflicts by showing that cultural close relations become threats. Double feelings in this story reflect similar peace efforts between member nations within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Many visual elements of the setting including how people sit and use their facial expression and hands during rituals help store deeper cultural details. People in the film show their respect through body positions that match traditional practices across Southeast Asian cultures. Body language matches the words and images to make the fictional Kumandra feel real through cultural traditions. The movie shows viewers similar textures as it shows them soup being eaten and tropical foods like rice and fruits pictured.

Fauna and side characters like Tuk Tuk, the pill bug-armadillo hybrid, and the mischievous Ongis—part monkey, part trader—also serve semiotic functions. The Ongis market scenes show bartering just like real markets in Southeast Asia while Tuk Tuk's armor shell represents spiritual defense from Asian tradition. The movie's cultural story gains support through these fanciful creatures that stand for community values such as seeing through hard times and barter trading methods.

Cinematically, lighting and color grading help demarcate tribal identities and ideological divides. Scenes in Fang are bathed in cold, metallic tones that evoke authoritarian control, while scenes in Heart or Tail use warmer palettes to imply openness and organic harmony. Using color psychology creates emotional tension and shows viewers the feelings of each setting.

Through these visuals the film provides Southeast Asian art elements to viewers but also uses color and design to guide their emotions and connect to the culture. The visual storytelling methods show the connection between what creators intend to express and what viewers experience on an artistic level.

Culture acts as a soft diplomatic tool in this film used for earning global support while advancing market opportunities. When Disney reaches new international markets they build understanding between cultures and also give a particular view of each region's identity. In its approach the movie adopts a tactic referred to as strategic essentialism by cultural scholars to highlight diverse perspectives and adjust them for universal acceptance. Communication experts and storytellers continuously face the task of supporting worldwide entertainment projects without disrespecting regional heritage.

Raya and the Last Dragon represents a fantasy animated production by Walt Disney Animation Studios that hit theaters on March 5, 2021. The film is directed by Don Hall and Carlos López Estrada, with a script written by Qui Nguyen and Adele Lim. The film features the voices of Kelly Marie Tran as Raya and Awkwafina as Sisu, the Last Dragon. In 107 minutes, this film tells the adventure of a warrior named Raya in her quest to reunite the divided land of Kumandra and defeat the evil forces known as Druun.



Figure 1 : Images of the animated film “Raya and the Last Dragon” (source: Disney Movies)

The narrative structure of the movie “Raya and the Last Dragon” is presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 :** Table of Narrative Structure of the Movie “Raya and The Last Dragon”

Narrative Stage	Description
Exposition	The story begins by showing Kumandra and explains how humans formed bonds with dragons while revealing that Druun changes living things into stone. The Heart tribe appointed Raya as their Dragon Stone guardian
Trigger Incidents	Because Namaari betrayed the Fang tribe, the Dragon Stone fractured, bringing Druun back to life and turning Raya’s father into stone. Raya sets out to locate the last surviving dragon, Sisu.
Rising Action	Team Sisu takes the mission to reclaim the Dragon Stone fragments, which the Tail Talon Spine and Fang tribes guard. They include recruits who have endured many obstacles during their mission.
Climax	In the Fang lands, Raya faces Namaari while trusting the former Dagger member to make the Dragon Stone whole and destroy Druun.

Our analysis results appear here and their effects apply to the explored research issues theory and researched literature. Our analysis uses specific movie elements from Raya and the Last Dragon to propose how mise-en-scène features show these ideas in film scenes. Our results fall into two main categories based on our blended research techniques which are narrative structure and picture meaning analysis.

Movement director Adele Lim explains during her interviews that the production team worked hard to display Southeast Asian heritage correctly because they consulted experts from the entire area (Lim, 2021). Viewers from Malaysia and Indonesia reacted to the movie by praising Southeast Asian cultural symbols yet criticizing its absence of specific country identities according to Sutanto (2022) and Tiongson (2019). People from Southeast Asia noticed common aspects of their daily lives represented in the film but thought the depiction lacked detailed specifics about their region. The explored viewpoints show both the worldwide

brands' interests and scattered Asian communities' unique requirements which shows media products should handle Asian identity properly.

### Narrative Binary Oppositions and Cultural Meaning

#### *Frame Capture Description 1 – Scene: Raya and Namaari Confrontation (00:58:42)*

- Visual Composition: Two characters framed in opposing diagonals.
- Lighting: Raya is lit in cool blues, Namaari in warmer shadows.
- Symbolism: Glowing gem at Raya's waist foregrounds the theme of fractured unity.

**Figure 3**



*Figure 2 : Scene Raya and Namaari Confrontation*

The film shows the narrative comparisons through specific visual tableaux in its scenes. When Raya and Namaari stand face to face at Spine (00:58:42) the camera angles show them as separate people in both mind and body. Raya's pose holds the fragmented dragon gem but keeps her waist open showing unity. Meanwhile Namaari defends herself with her arms crossed to symbolize betrayal. Lighting elements show Raya in warmer shadows to display her inner turmoil while keeping Raya in cooler lighting to represent her rational side.

Costume helps tell the story by using important symbolism. From the start of her adventure Raya wears earth-colored clothes to reflect her past roots while upgrading to batik

and ikat layered garments as she accepts wisdom from different tribes. Her different designs display her personal growth from refusing others to uniting with them. At 01:29:31 the camera captures five tribal elders forming a balanced formation as bright light from the restored gem unites all their beliefs.

Our analysis shows that *Raya and the Last Dragon* creates its moral values by consistently using two opposite elements throughout the story. The movie presents trust versus betrayal as the main conflict between Raya and Namaari while showing their deep emotional and responsibility ties. The story displays multiple conflicts between unity and separation as well as between traditional and modern ways of living plus order and disorder to symbolize Southeast Asian social dilemmas.

A mythic quest plot lets Raya explore different lands as she unwillingly follows this path to include mythical elements from historic stories across different nations. The film uses these contrasts to guide its story and represent ethical views: people strive towards cultural advancement when united but fall morally when they separate themselves. Underneath its international appeal the film secretly represents regional aims regarding cultural and political collaboration in ASEAN.

**Table 3 :** Binary Opposition Analysis Table in “*Raya and the Last Dragon*”

Binary Opposition	Description	Interpretation of Cultural Hybridity
Unity vs Split	Kumandra was originally a united land, but it was divided into five rival regions.	This area shares a combined past of many Southeast Asian nations and kingdoms that share common origins but maintain individual cultural traditions. This film teaches us that diverse people need to stand together.
Tradition vs Modernity	Raya sticks to traditional values in her mission, while some of the other characters are more pragmatic and adaptive to change.	Explain how Southeast Asian people balance their cultural heritage with current life changes. The movie shows that society needs a proper mixture of cultural preservation and modern changes.
Trust vs Suspicion	After a past betrayal, the characters in the film have difficulty trusting each other, which hinders their attempts to reunite.	Southeast Asia faces social issues with understanding and uniting ethnic populations and countries so trust must be restored to create regional peace.
Human vs Nature	The presence of Dragons as guardians of nature and their interactions with humans shows the relationship between humans and nature.	Different Southeast Asian local traditions value harmony between people and nature along with protecting their environmental legacy as their cultural heritage.
Heroism vs Betrayal	Raya’s journey as a hero who faces various forms of betrayal from other characters.	This scene tells a traditional myth from Southeast Asia about heroes who test their allies as they demonstrate cultural virtues of right and wrong.

Multiple societies of Southeast Asia directly impact how filmmakers depict opposing pairs in their films. The fight for unity expands across different political and cultural regions throughout Southeast Asia. The film reveals trust and distrust block ethnic groups from forming a single united society.

The film “Raya and the Last Dragon” delivers a thrilling story, creating a medium to examine Southeast Asia’s diverse society and culture. The movie skilfully blends these aspects into its story to help people understand why working together and trusting others improve diversity. Through its storytelling, “Raya and the Last Dragon” displays how digital media adopts visual customs from Southeast Asia for widespread acceptance. The film combines rich and complex cultural elements through structural narrative analysis and visual cultural context.

### Visual Codes and Symbolic Hybridity

#### **Frame Capture Description 2 – Scene: Heart Palace Exterior (00:05:00)**

- Architecture: Multi-layered roofing resembling Thai pagodas; stone carvings echo Balinese motifs.
- Color Palette: Earthy reds and golds signifying royalty and tradition.
- Spatial Design: Wide symmetrical layout reinforcing cultural centrality.



*Figure 3 : Heart Palace Exterior*

#### **Frame Capture Description 3 – Scene: Sisu Emergence (00:50:00)**

- Dragon Design: Soft pastels, glowing textures, fluid movement.
- Visual Fusion: Combines Naga mythologies with Western visual appeal.
- Mise-en-scène: Surrounded by fog, pastel blue hues dominate the scene, invoking dreamlike awe.



*Figure 4 : Scene Sisu Emergence*

Visually, the film has symbolic references that merge Southeast Asian elements into a coherent yet imagined cultural landscape. In the introductory sequence (00:01:50–00:03:30), the narrator overlays a map of Kumandra with motifs resembling Angkor Wat architecture, Javanese temples, and Vietnamese stilt houses. The design of Heart's palace (00:05:00) draws heavily on Balinese and Thai architectural styles, blending columns, carvings, and tiered roofing systems that encode visual heritage without direct citation.

One of the most visually iconic motifs is the Dragon Sisu, whose color palette (soft blue and white), serpentine body, and movement recall Naga myths from Laos and Cambodia but are rendered with a soft glow and round-eyed expressions familiar in Disney's animation style. The gemstone, present throughout the film, is framed centrally in shots and often glows with pulsing blue light—functioning not only as a magical device but as a semiotic anchor of unity. *Mise-en-scène* elements like fog-diffused light and symmetrical group composition in scenes of reconciliation (e.g., 01:26:45) reinforce the hybrid tone between myth and modernity.

The analysis shows that the film blends Southeast Asian motifs into a unified hybrid aesthetic. Costumes, architectural designs, weapons, landscapes, and body language contribute to Kumandra's visual world-building. While these elements reference real-world traditions—such as the Indonesian *keris*, Thai temples, Vietnamese hats, and Filipino textiles—they are recontextualized into a single visual system that supports the film's narrative logic.

Such visual hybridity simultaneously affirms and obscures cultural specificity. On the one hand, it elevates Southeast Asian visibility in mainstream media; on the other, it risks reducing diverse traditions into aesthetic markers devoid of historical or socio-political context. For example, the stylization of Sisu, the Dragon, draws from multiple mythological sources but is rendered in a form consistent with Western animation norms—thus reflecting a hybridized but still Western-dominated visual code.

The gemstone, symbolizing unity and power, is a recurring motif that visually unites the narrative structure and the ideological message. Its broken light symbolizes both the damaged countries and future unity of Kumandra. The representation connects to Bhabha's view (1994) that diversity leads to both conflict and new opportunities for combining cultures.

### **Implications for Cultural Representation**

The research proves that *Raya and the Last Dragon* is a cultural bridge since it picks the elements of Asian heritage for international viewers. The film gives Asian culture wider recognition, but people question its impact and financial benefits from using heritage content.

This research method uses both narrative interpretation and visual symbol reading to show what politics lie hidden in visual content.

According to Kristiyono and Ida (2020) the results support their argument about the digital cultural expression struggle against media globalization's cultural decline. The film displays Southeast Asian culture through its beautiful traditions and harmful threats. The film's narrative teaches viewers to analyze how culture develops across social networks.

The filmmaker struggles to show authentic and respectful Southeast Asian cultural traditions in their film production. Movie creators need to study local cultures deeply and talk to cultural professionals to show authentic images. The film project benefit from cultural consultant involvement because they help maintain true cultural representation.

The achievements of "Raya and the Last Dragon" demonstrate that digital media can build local culture into high quality products. Digital platforms help Southeast Asian storytellers share their native cultures to create diverse worldwide content choices.

Through the film's telling "Raya and the Last Dragon" not only amuses viewers but also educates them about Southeast Asian heritage. Digital media works well for showing different cultures to the world (see table 4).

**Table 4 :** Summary Table of Narrative and Visual Findings

Analytical Focus	Description	Cultural Significance
Binary Opposition	Trust vs Betrayal (Raya– Namaari), Unity vs Fragmentation (Kumandra), Tradition vs Modernity (tribal differences)	Reflects socio-political tensions in Southeast Asia; mirrors ASEAN discourse on regional solidarity and diversity.
Hero's Journey	Raya's transformation from suspicion to self-sacrifice, symbolizing moral growth through collective reconciliation	Represents Southeast Asian values of harmony, communal leadership, and cultural resilience.
Sisu (Dragon)	Visual fusion of Southeast Asian Naga mythology with Disney aesthetics; soft glow, fluid motion, pastel colors	Symbol of fluid identity and hybrid spirituality; blends sacred myth with modern accessibility.
Cultural Mise-en-scène	Architecture (Thai–Balinese), clothing (batik, ikat), rituals (sembah, sitting posture), market scenes, food (soups, rice)	Grounds Kumandra in Southeast Asian spatial and sensory codes; evokes authenticity through familiar textures.
Side Characters (Tuk Tuk, Ongis)	Animal companions representing protection, trade, and cooperation; embedded in	Reinforces social values like barter economy, symbiosis

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	Southeast Asian folklore and local fauna symbolism	with nature, and community interdependence.
Lighting & Color Grading	Cold palettes in Fang (control), warm tones in Heart (harmony), neutral in Tail (desert nomadism)	Visual index of ideological positioning among tribes; guides audience emotion and interpretation.
Gemstone Symbol	Central, glowing object shattered and reassembled; source of conflict and resolution	Metaphor for cultural integration and fragmentation; embodies Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity and shared hope.
Narrative Resolution	Sacrificial trust leads to restoration; power is returned not to an individual but to collective unity	Challenges Western heroism with Southeast Asian ethics of trust, mutuality, and restorative justice.

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The research reveals their impact on business norms and how animation is represented across global markets. Modern critics determine how international stories are told and entertainment businesses must disclose if they support or gain from native heritage. *Raya and the Last Dragon* demonstrates how combining Southeast Asian art traditions gives new chances for underserved talents to come forward. The method shows both benefits and risks in its approach to represent traditional ways of life. Production teams should collaborate with cultural experts as equal partners for new creations instead of using them as advisors. Media content must include all voices, and all creators should have equal chances to participate in the creative process.

Our analysis reveals that while *Raya and the Last Dragon* increases Southeast Asian visibility, it does so through aesthetic amalgamation rather than cultural specificity. The hybridity portrayed aligns with what Bhabha describes as a "third space"—a space of negotiation—but it also illustrates the limits of representation in corporate media. The ideological framing of *Kumandra* reflects not only a fantasy of unity but also a strategic essentialism tailored for global consumption. Such insights are essential to understanding how media production industries frame non-Western identities in ways that are visually digestible but politically ambiguous.

Lighting, costume, architecture, and symbolic creatures such as Sisu, Tuk Tuk, and the Ongis provide rich sites for semiotic interpretation. Their design borrows heavily from regional mythologies, yet the final aesthetic conforms to Disney's global house style—reflecting hybridity but also dilution. The research demonstrates how to analyse animated content within cultural studies and visual content education effectively. By looking at entertainment media thoroughly students and teachers can link chosen subjects to identity and visual aspects through this merged evaluation approach. The film offers students a strong learning opportunity as it helps them explore world media power structures, identity-making, and representation politics. The approach in this research can become a standard method for studying other cultural media content while giving

researchers ways to analyse the visual ways storytelling impacts cultural recognition. The results reveal problems with media industries and show how educational content should address diverse specific situations.

#### **4. Conclusion (Cambria Bold, 12pt)**

This research offers a cultural analysis that transcends film summary and instead foregrounds ideological messaging embedded within narrative and design. By combining structural narrative analysis with visual semiotics, the study contributes a unique methodological lens to cultural studies. It raises awareness of how Southeast Asian identities are shaped, stylized, and circulated in global animation, and urges content creators to adopt more nuanced and collaborative approaches in cultural representation.

The movie passes the image of the region as one through combined design themes and stories from different Southeast Asian cultures. However, the transport of certain traits to all of them might cause a loss of cultural richness and subtlety. The research furthermore advises viewers and scholars to carefully consider associated mixed cultural expressions in their academic studies and in their media reports.

As a test subject, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is an excellent case study to start with for examining the way international animation integrates culture into its appreciation and profit. This research complements media critical studies by providing a research plan which combines the analysis of narrative structure and visual image to reveal how artists embed their knowledge into their work. And, animation makers and cultural researchers have to examine how they portray different marginal communities without sacrificing the cultural authenticity and integrity.

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