

Visual symbolism in 2D animated film on the traumatic impact of child abuse

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Abstract. Sexual violence remains a critical and pervasive issue in Indonesian society, affecting victims across diverse demographics and social backgrounds. Perpetrators are often individuals in positions of trust, such as family members, educators, or religious leaders, highlighting the deeply entrenched nature of the problem. Using a qualitative method, this paper tries to investigate the phenomenon by exploring the use of animation as a powerful and underutilized medium in Indonesia for addressing complex and taboo social issues. Animation offers artists a platform to navigate sensitive topics without the constraints of realism. In a society where discussion of sexual abuse is often silenced due to cultural aspects, animation can serve as a bridge that connects viewers emotionally and intellectually to the experience of survivors. By implementing metaphor, stylization, symbolism, animated narratives can bypass societal resistance and foster empathy and dialogue. Specifically, this paper analyzes the 2D animated short film “Next Time”, focusing on the visual symbols used to convey the emotional and psychological impact of sexual abuse. The finding emphasizes that an interdisciplinary approach combining sociological insight and artistic expression can be a powerful tool for social change.

Keywords: Animation, Visual Symbolism, Sexual Abuse, Short Animation, Narrative

Introduction

Sexual violence or abuse is an act of degrading, insulting, harassing, and/or attacking another person’s body and reproductive functions (Waigandt et al., 1990). To this day, this issue remains widespread and mainstream in Indonesian society. To give context, recently, in December of 2023, the Indonesian Commission of Child Protection (KPAI) declared that there were a recorded 3,000 cases of violence towards children, including sexual abuse. Going backward, in May 2023 there was a case of sexual abuse involving a 16-year-old girl raped by 11 confirmed persons, and in early February of 2023, there were 6 confirmed cases of sexual abuse involving children and trusted adult figures as the perpetrators. Patriarchal culture (Munir & Juwaini, 2020), low economic status, and low levels of education (Kurniawaty, 2022) are triggering factors for the occurrence of sexual violence, which perpetrators use to justify immoral behavior. Mass media access and disproportionate punishments (Syahputra, 2018) are contributing factors to the continued occurrence of child sexual violence in Indonesia.

This unending pattern of sexual abuse towards children seemed prominent and increasing as the months changed. The mainstream view regarding the perpetrator of sexual abuse towards children seemed contradictory to the common perception of what a perpetrator should be, as the news sources have cited that they mostly involve trusted adults such as teachers and

neighbors. Hiding one's identity and self-stigma can be a way to facilitate exploitation (Soesilo et al., n.d.)

Furthermore, how the mass public reacted and treated these cases seemed to blame the victims rather than directing the focus onto the perpetrators and the underlying issue as to why and how these cases can happen in the first place. Creates a victim-blame phenomenon, which is rooted in the culture of shame and silence (Harber et al., 2015). In patriarchal culture, incidents of sexual violence are often considered due to the victim's mistake in behaving, dressing, which causes the perpetrator to lose sexual control (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Being silent is often also considered a strength in dealing with sexual violence. The label of victim changes to survivor, making it seem as if the victim experienced an accident rather than a criminal act (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). Victims' fear of reporting and remaining silent is also inseparable from patriarchal culture, where men are considered more credible. Society tends to believe that men with high social status, respectable jobs, and good education must also have good morals; therefore, the assumption is that the victim must be at fault."

From this, it is clear that there is a lack of understanding and a sense of urgency in Indonesian society regarding the sexual abuse of children. Commonly, the topic of sex education itself is considered taboo and inappropriate as it has gained a stigma of indecency (Amalia et al., 2018).

Using animation as a medium to educate people regarding this issue is one of the attempts made to raise awareness and urgency of the inherent dangers of sexual abuse. Audio-visual media are considered effective in delivering the message (Rahmasari & Fathiyah, 2023).

The majority of Indonesian sexual abuse awareness animated content is made available to the public via social media platforms such as *YouTube*. Resulting in content that is more in the infographic format, a more formal approach, which, in some cases, is merely instructional and shows a lack of empathy. While there is nothing inherently wrong in educationally presenting this topic (through the use of data, worded definitions, and audio narration), this attempt unknowingly causes a gap between the viewers and the victims themselves. It leaves no room for the viewers to reflect on the horrific nature of sexual abuse and ultimately creates a mindset that such events can only happen to certain people, something they believe could never happen to them. Sexual abuse became a black-and-white topic where it's easier to blame the victims.

Using storytelling helps eliminate the distance between the viewer and the story, making it easier for the viewer to empathize and put themselves in the victim's situation. This becomes crucial in raising awareness, understanding, and comprehension of the issue, rather than just knowing it. Animation has proven to be effective in conveying complex problems wrapped in engaging narratives, such as in the animated film *Belle* (2021), where child abuse is the central theme, presented through visual symbolism in a futuristic world. Another example is the comic *Priya's Shakti*, which addresses sexual violence in India by creating a female superhero who inspires people to fight against sexual violence." (*About — Power of Priya*, n.d.).

Storytelling has the power to heal trauma. A story can mirror the experiences of individuals, making it a powerful tool for understanding human behavior and societal dynamics. It bridges the gap between personal struggles and social conditions, acting as a force for healing not just on an individual level, but also fostering shifts in societal values.

The traumatic impact of sexual abuse covers not only physical but also psychological impact on the victim, which would last a long-term effect if it is not treated professionally (Ekandari et al., 2001), and the social treatment one is exposed to in day-to-day life can undoubtedly contribute to the well-being and the chance to recover in the victim's behalf.

Therefore, it is important to utilize animation as a medium to connect the viewers with the victims by informing the viewers through visual symbolisms about the reality that victims of sexual abuse went through and raise awareness by sparking a conversation or a debate on the

solution that can be done to prevent sexual abuse among children as well as what can be done to help the victims.

Visual symbolism can effectively help in recounting the narrative through artistic imageries that strengthen the overall message and morals of the story (Munawaroh, 2023), furthermore, it engages the viewers in seeking and analyzing underlying themes. The use of 2D animation with an iconic art style allows the viewers to project themselves into the characters presented and provides an immersive experience. ("Perbedaan Penggunaan Media Video Animasi Dan Kartu Bergambar Terhadap Pencegahan Sexual Abuse Pada Anak Usia Sekolah," 2021)

"Next Time" is a short animated film that uses heavy symbolism in the visuals and plot. It is 7 minutes and 48 seconds long and tells the story of two sexual abuse victims in the setting of an Indonesian high school. The main protagonists are two high schoolers, Nopal, a basketball champion student, and Ayu, an outcast student. The two protagonists have different circumstances, and despite facing the same problem, they are treated differently by the people around them, which impacts how they deal with the conflict of the story. The film puts a heavy emphasis on the situation that is outside of the protagonists' control as a way to mirror the reality that sexual abuse victims find themselves in. While the depiction of the traumatic impact of sexual abuse is thoroughly present in the film, the film also explores the abuser pipeline, which is a theory that a victim can become an abuser and spiral into a never-ending cycle of abuse (Plummer & Cossins, 2018). Although there is still debate regarding the validity of this theory, the discussion on this topic highlights the issue where violence can play a role in becoming a cycle of abuse, a scenario where violence cannot stop and can even affect the victim's outlook.

Methods

The methods used in this research involve a qualitative approach, which consists of methodical literature studies and data analysis of the semiotics present in the short animated film "Next Time". Design theories, especially regarding semiotics, apply to the analytical breakdown of the film as it heavily relies on visual symbolism. "Both character and background design are deliberately constructed as semiotic elements, each contributing to the layered construction of meaning and reinforcing the film's underlying message.

Semiotic Theory: Charles Sanders Peirce

Charles Sanders Peirce, an influential philosopher and logician, made significant contributions to the field of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior. His work laid the foundation for understanding how signs function and how they create meaning in various contexts. Peirce's theories remain relevant today, influencing disciplines ranging from linguistics and philosophy to anthropology and communication studies.

At the core of Peirce's semiotic theory is the concept of the sign, which he referred to as a "representamen." A representamen is any entity that stands in for something else, facilitating communication and understanding between individuals. According to Peirce, a sign is not merely a physical object or symbol; it embodies a complex relationship between three essential components: the representamen, the interpretant, and the object. Together, these elements form what Peirce termed the "Triangle of Meaning" (Chandler, 2004), a framework that illustrates how meaning is generated through the interaction of these components.



The first element, the representamen, is the form that a sign takes. It can be a word, an image, a gesture, or any other representation that conveys meaning. For example, a red traffic light serves as a representative that indicates the action of stopping. The second element, the interpretant, is the understanding or interpretation that arises in the mind of the observer when they encounter the representamen. This interpretation is shaped by the observer's experiences, knowledge, and cultural context. Continuing with the traffic light example, the interpretant involves the recognition that a red light means "stop," which is informed by societal norms and traffic laws.



The third element, the object, refers to the actual concept or idea that the representamen points to. It is the real-world entity or phenomenon that is being represented. In our traffic light example, the object is the action of stopping a vehicle. The object often carries social and cultural significance, which influences how the representamen is understood. Peirce emphasized that the relationship between the representamen, interpretant, and object is dynamic and context-dependent, leading to various interpretations based on different situational factors.

Peirce's Triangle of Meaning highlights the process of "semiosis," the ongoing interaction and interpretation of signs. Semiosis is not a one-time event but an ever-evolving process where signs generate new meanings and interpretations over time. This continuous cycle of meaning-making is essential for effective communication and understanding in human interactions.

Furthermore, Peirce categorized signs into three types based on their relationship to their objects: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons resemble their objects, such as a photograph of a person. Indexes have a direct correlation with their objects, like smoke indicating fire. Symbols, on the other hand, are arbitrary and rely on social conventions, such as the word "tree" representing the concept of a tree. This classification underscores the complexity of how signs operate and the various ways in which people derive meaning from them.

In conclusion, Charles Sanders Peirce's contributions to semiotics provide a profound understanding of how signs function in the process of communication. His Triangle of Meaning illustrates the intricate interplay between representamen, interpretant, and object, revealing the multifaceted nature of meaning. By examining the relationship between these elements, we gain insight into the complexities of human understanding and the significance of context in interpretation. Peirce's work continues to resonate across disciplines, emphasizing the importance of signs in shaping our perceptions and interactions with the world around us. (Budi, 2019). Furthermore, Peirce classified a sign into three categories: Icon, Index, and Symbol, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of icon, index, and symbol implementation

Term	Definition	Example
Icon	A sign that resembles closely to the real object.	
Index	A sign that is related to the object through its implications.	
Symbol	A sign that is collectively agreed upon in society.	Apple

(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

In the creation of the film *Next Time*, the use of icons, indexes, and symbols is applied in various elements. For example, the use of school uniforms enables viewers to readily identify

the setting as a junior high school in Indonesia, where uniform color codes are standardized and consistently applied across the country. This visual cue serves as a culturally specific signifier that reinforces the narrative context without the need for explicit exposition.

Metaphor Theory: Ullmann

A metaphor is a figure of speech; metaphors can take various forms. While they have traditionally been expressed verbally, they can also be conveyed through imagery (Sajaniemi & Stützle, 2007). According to Ullmann, a metaphor is formed when there is a similarity between two objects or terms (tenor) with the object that is being compared. Tenor is a concrete meaning behind a word or a term being spoken, while Vehicle is an object used to be compared with said word. The effectiveness of a metaphor can be measured by the distance between the Tenor and the Vehicle. For example, **time = thief**. In this metaphor, the word *time* is a Tenor, while the *thief* is a Vehicle. Rather than explicitly comparing time to a thief, in this case, it can be implied that time is like a thief because of its ability to steal valuable things such as experience, age, and many more. To sum up, an effective metaphor with expressive qualities can be achieved when the distance between the Tenor and the Vehicle is far apart as opposed to closer (Potter & Ullmann, 1963).

In the film *Next Time*, the choice to omit the depiction of a mouth on the main character serves as a metaphor for being silenced, voiceless, and oppressed by their circumstances. Similarly, the supporting characters are shown without eyes, symbolizing a metaphorical blindness or unwillingness to see the reality of the situation unfolding around them.

Surrealist Theory

In the world of fine art, "surrealism" refers to an artistic movement that emerged in the early 20th century, particularly between World War I and World War II. The movement sought to explore the unconscious mind as a source of creativity, breaking free from the constraints of rational thought, logic, and conventional aesthetics. Surrealism is closely associated with the idea of automatism, a technique in which artists express themselves spontaneously, without the interference of conscious control or traditional moral and aesthetic norms.

The movement was formally articulated in 1924 by André Breton in his Surrealist Manifesto (Breton, 1992), where he described surrealism as a "pure psychic automatism"—a process of creating works that emerge from the unconscious mind, free from the constraints of logical reasoning. According to Breton, surrealism was not just an artistic style but a way of thinking, a liberation of thought from the rational mind. It aimed to unite dreams and reality, exploring irrational or fantastical imagery and tapping into the deeper layers of the psyche.

Surrealist artists sought to create works that were bizarre, thought-provoking, and often unsettling, using techniques like automatic drawing, free association, and dream analysis to access the subconscious. By doing so, surrealism challenged established norms and opened up new possibilities for creative expression (Vial, 2009), influencing art, literature, and even film for decades to come.

In the film *Next Time*, the presence of characters without eyes or mouths who behave as if nothing is unusual highlights a departure from reality. This represents the film's surrealist aspect, creating a dreamlike atmosphere in which visually uncanny elements are presented within an otherwise realistic context.



Result and Discussion

In this animated film, there are four main characters (prominent characters), consisting of the two protagonists Nopal and Ayu as shown in Figure 1, the antagonist Mr Sahid, and the background characters at school. Several elements that were considered in developing this character design were the visual symbolism of the facial features of the film characters, as well as the symbolism of clothing and colors according to the context of each character's social background.

Character Design

In this film, Nopal and Ayu are victims of sexual abuse from the same perpetrator, who is their sports teacher, Pak Sahid. Nopal is from a lower-class background, but his achievements as the basketball champion made him well-liked by his peers and teachers. Ayu, on the other hand, is an outcast from her class due to her pregnancy at such a young age being an open secret.

Both victims were designed with no mouths to symbolize their inability to speak out, as opposed to the other characters designed with no eyes, to symbolize their ineptness in seeing the root cause of the problem: the inability to see the whole picture and only being able to spout gossip. This feature is further emphasized in one scene where their faces contort into a hollow crater. The absence of a mouth in the character can be interpreted as illustrated in Table 2.



Figure 1 Character design and background characters
(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

Table 2. Analysis of the lack of mouth characters

	Definition
Icon	A realistic depiction of human without a mouth
Index	A lack of mouth suggesting as an index of silence, oppression or the inability to communicate, suggesting something happened to cause the silence
Symbol	A mouth often symbolize repression, being silenced, isolation

(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

Pak Sahid's presence in the film is the least prominent, but whenever he makes an appearance, it directly influences the course of the story and affects the students' attitude towards Nopal and Ayu, respectively. This is to signal Pak Sahid's role and position in the school; as he is the teacher, he is at the top of the hidden social hierarchy present in the school, and therefore, with such a position comes its privileges, and he abused that. Pak Sahid used Nopal's low-class background to exploit him under the guise of letting him be the basketball team's captain. He adopts a condescending attitude towards Ayu to ostracize her from her classmates, thereby preventing them from inquiring further about her incident. He is depicted as a conventionally physically strong male, towering over most of the other characters in the film. His pose suggests authority as seen in Figure 2. His visual symbolization can be interpreted as shown in Figure 5.

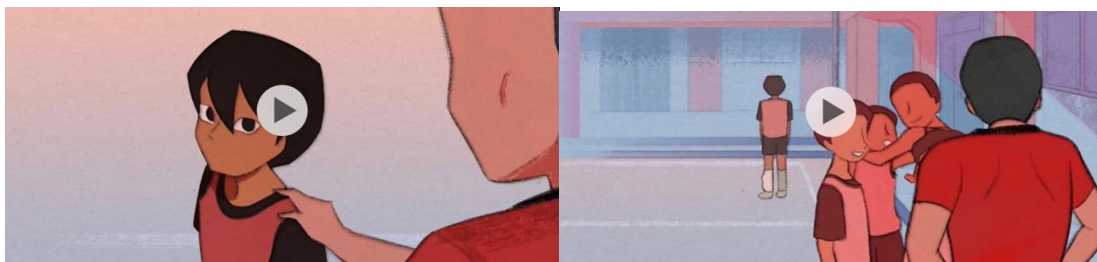


Figure 2 Scene with Pak Sahid character
(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

Table 3. Analysis of Pak Sahid characters

	Definition
Icon	Pak Sahid stand with upright posture, speaking with both hand on his hips, chin lifted and with a heavy voice.
Index	His presence is dominance, in crucial scene he is portrayed from behind with his big body, overpowering the protagonist.
Symbol	All the visual suggest control, surveillance or the suppression of individual freedom.

(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

Color palette

The movie's use of color functions as a multi-layered semiotic technique, producing intricate and changing meanings as the story progresses. The protagonist's psychological separation from reality and his absorption in the joy and passion of playing basketball are indicated by the first use of a pastel color scheme, which creates a dreamlike environment. A visual metaphor for the protagonist's inner state, which is characterized by ambiguity and emotional instability, these gentle, subdued tones imply a manufactured, confusing, and emotionally suspended reality. The color palette progressively moves toward warmer tones, especially red and yellow, as the story goes on, indicating a change in tone and emotional intensity. Red gains significant symbolic meaning in this situation. In the movie, red is associated with danger, violence, domination, and moral transgression, based on traditional semiotic connections. The school uniforms and, more importantly, the outfit worn by Pak Sahid, the antagonist of the movie, are the clearest examples of this. The use of red on such characters visually signals tension, conflict, and authoritarian control.

By the film's final act, red saturates the visual field, enveloping backgrounds, environments, and characters alike. This overwhelming presence of red suggests that the entire institutional space—students, staff, and school infrastructure—has become complicit in the symbolic "sin" committed against Nopal and Ayu. In this way, color not only enhances the aesthetic dimension of the film but also deepens its narrative and ethical commentary, using chromatic shifts to mirror the protagonist's psychological journey and the oppressive structures surrounding him. This aligns with the bystander effect concept in moral psychology where individual tends not to intervene during crises (Bannon & Foubert, 2017).

Symbolism

Sport

Sport is a competitive activity that focuses on physical ability; those who win tend to be stronger. Therefore, the theme of this film centers around sports, from basketball to the August 17th sports competitions. The use of basketball (figure 6) in Nopal's character indicates that Nopal is often used. This is because, like a basketball which is usually bounced around, the connotation is that Nopal likes to be used as he pleases here and there by people in his school environment. Just like the ball, Nopal is the object of repeated action. It symbolized the Nopal's



passive victimhood, exploited by the institutional actor, Pak Sahid. Thus, Nopal, like the ball, is not the player but the object of manipulation.

Apart from that, the image of a tug-of-war competition (figure 3) between teachers and students symbolizes the power dynamics in the school's hierarchical structure. This can be seen in the final scene of the film where Nopal takes part in the competition against Pak Sahid, who, in the end, still loses because metaphorically he is just a student who has no power in the school environment. This is also applied to the fact that Nopal is a victim of sexual violence who does not have the strength to fight the perpetrators of violence to achieve justice. His loss is inevitable, symbolizing the asymmetrical power relation. The tug of war is not just a sport but a ritual domination, reasserting structural inequality under the guise of festive activity.



Figure 3 Visual symbolism in sport
(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

Class Decoration Competition

In the film, the class decoration competition scene, as shown in figure 4 is portrayed as part of a series of events held to commemorate Indonesia's Independence Day on August 17 at Nopal School. While the stated aim of the competition is to celebrate patriotism and promote collaboration among students, the scene gradually reveals growing tensions and conflicts among them. Rather than fostering unity, the activity exposes a deeper critique of institutional priorities, where external appearances are valued more than genuine substance. Prioritize appearance over justice.

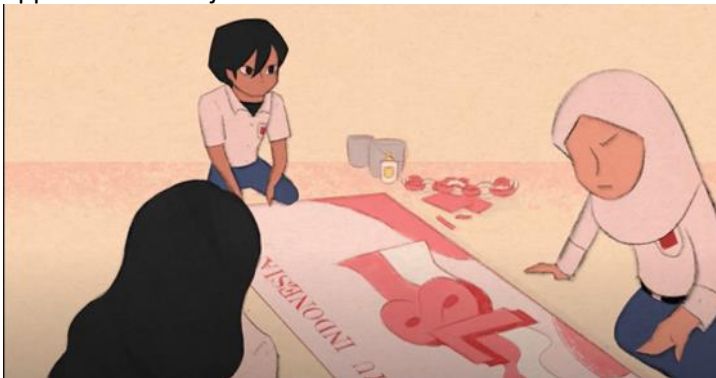


Figure 4 Visual Symbolism in Class Decoration Competition
(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

Nopal's locker

Figure 5 shows the scene of Nopal's locker contained a lot of trash left over from snacks, so it was covered in flies and maggots, leading to his friend saying that the cause of the bad smell in the classroom was Nopal's locker. Under the pile of rubbish are Nopal's certificates of achievement and medals for participating in basketball competitions. This imagery functions as a powerful metaphor for the hidden trauma behind Nopal's accomplishments. His success is not only neglected but symbolically buried under decay. His powerless situation led to the failure to

recognize his values and identity, a symbol of how trauma and violence corrupt personal milestones. Furthermore, it reflects a system that silences and erases victims rather than supporting them.



Figure 5 Visual symbolism in Nopal's locker
(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

School

The Junior School setting is a semiotic construct loaded with layered signs that mirror broader societal power structures. Through its institutional structure, the school becomes a symbolic arena where systems of authority, hierarchy, and exploitation are enacted and visualized. The 2D stacked visual imagery, as shown in Figure 6 is the representation of spatial hierarchy within the school, pointing out systemic division and asymmetry of power. It represents society as a whole, structured, hierarchical, and often oppressive. By organizing visual elements vertically, the film creates a direct spatial metaphor for power, where the top dominates those bellowed.



Figure 6 Visual symbolism in Junior high school society hierarchy
(Source: Alisa Arindhani)

Conclusion

The application of visual elements such as symbols, metaphors, and semiotic codes serves to heighten the emotional resonance of the narrative. Each contributes to the layered construction of meaning and enforces the film's underlying message, transforming the viewing experience into a critical interpretation and an act of meaning-making.

This short animated film utilizes visual semiotics across multiple layers, including narrative structure, color palette, character design, etc. Through these coded elements, the film conveys the internal journey of Nopal as a victim of sexual violence, whose psychological trauma gradually intensified, resulting in unintended harm toward Ayu, another survivor.

Through symbolic imagery, the film visually externalizes internal pain, a symbol of constructed cultural association that encodes and allows the imagery to critique the social structure that perpetuates silence and complicity. These semiotic signs act as indexes of trauma, repression, and silence and invite the viewer to piece together meaning, much like interpreting a dream – a process central to surrealist visual language.

For further research, one might consider looking for other aspects of sexual violence, expanding into comparative analyses of how trauma- PTSD is rendered through symbolic abstraction and surreal semiotic systems in another form of visual media.

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