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Research Article

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"But Families Don't All Grow in One Straight Line": How Family is Represented in *Spellbound* (2024) Film

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of family in *Spellbound* animated film, explicitly portraying the process of parental separation as a productive decision, a scenario largely absent in similar animated films. This study fills the gap of previous study by scrutinizing the parental separation as a constructive transformation of family structure by examining its representation. The analysis draws on Stuart Hall's constructionist approach, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* on family as realized category, and using multimodality as the method. The objective is to examine whether the film reinforces traditional family ideology or challenges them by portraying non-traditional family structures. Research data is gathered from still shots and dialogues or lyrics. The findings of this study shows that while the film reinforces the ideology through concepts of parental love and collective struggle, it also challenges the ideology by redefining family through separation and showing child agency. Overall, this study reveals that the representation of family in *Spellbound* not only portrays the complexities of separation and transformation. Despite its non-traditional structure, unity is no longer defined only by an intact household, but by emotional well-being and mutual recognition. This indicates that the *habitus* of the American family accepting new forms while still grounded in parental love as the emotional anchor.

Keywords: *Spellbound*; family representation; Bourdieu; habitus; children's media

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1. Introduction

According to Clark (2008), teen films from 1980 to 2007 show a significant change of diverse family structures such as single-parent families, blended families, communal families, and divorced families or called a non-traditional family model. The traditional family emphasizes how family structure is based on gender roles and biological ties, constructing a sense of order and predictability within the household (Furstenberg, 2019). This model is widely portrayed in films such as *Moana* (2014), *Elementar* (2023), and *Keluarga Cemara* (2018). However, sociologist Coontz (2020) argues that contemporary family structures are progressively diverse. This shift constructs broader social changes that challenge the conventional structure of family.

Despite the shift, the portrayal of divorce or its process remains largely absent, specifically in animated films. In *Spellbound* (2024), unlike many animated films, the process of divorce or separation is explicitly portrayed. While most separations are depicted negatively, *Spellbound* (2024) tries to construct separation as a productive decision. The film follows Princess Ellian as she navigates her

parents' transformation from monstrous form because of a spell to a human form and the eventual separation as the resolution of the film.

As this study will examine how the family is represented in the *Spellbound* (2024) film then it is crucial to use representation theory by Stuart Hall and supported by Bourdieu's key concept of habitus on family as a realized category. According to Hall (1997), representation is not merely mirroring the reality yet process of each meaning to be constructed and negotiated within cultural and social contexts, implying the same codes that shapes how people interpret symbols and narratives. This constructionist model aligns with Bourdieu's concept of habitus on family as a realized category that both constructed through ongoing social practices. Bourdieu calls habitus, when the feeling of family is natural. Habitus is an invisible rule inside us that makes us agree on what family means and how it works. Additionally, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) will be used as the method. The term "multimodality" is used to indicate the significance of symbolic resources other than language, for instance, character expressions, colors, settings, dialogues, and the lyrics of soundtrack, critically to construct meaning (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). These theories and the method will be used in examining *Spellbound* (2024) to reveal whether the film reinforces traditional family ideologies or challenges them by portraying non-traditional structures.

In order for this research to fill the gap of previous studies concerning the representation of family in films, three studies are used. First, Aini et al. (2024) explored social critique in the film *Ali & Ratu Queens* through Bourdieu's sociological theory, demonstrating how a film can be read as a literary work that reflects social realities, including those rooted in family relationships. Second, Dewi (2025) examined the representation of Chinese culture, particularly family beliefs and values, in Domee Shi's *Turning Red* (2022), showing how animated films portray family as a site where cultural values are transmitted across generations. Third, Putri's (2025) research is currently the only study known to analyze the film *Spellbound* (2024), focusing specifically from the linguistic perspective on the use of figurative language in its dialogue. However, none of these studies scrutinizes the theme of family in *Spellbound* (2024). It is therefore important to examine this theme, since *Spellbound* (2024) represents different complexities of a family as the first institution that shapes our identity and values.

2. Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach by analyzing *Spellbound* (2024) as the material object. The data was primarily taken from scenes in the film in the form of dialogues and selected cut-scenes watched through its streaming platform, Netflix. *Spellbound* (2024) explores the family dynamic that is seemingly an ongoing discourse in the film industry in recent years; it highlights a different resolution not commonly discussed. This film portrays a non-traditional family structure as a liveable and productive decision, this can bring forth an insight to representation of family in film.

Data analysis was conducted using Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory, Bourdieu's key concept of *habitus* on family as a realized category, and multimodality as the method. The constructionist model from Stuart Hall's representation theory is particularly relevant for analyzing media texts such as film as this study will examine. This model recognizes that meaning is not simply reflecting or transmitting, yet it is actively produced through signs, languages, images, and other semiotic resources within specific social or historical contexts. The concept of *habitus* on family as realized category by Pierre Bourdieu (1996) challenges the assumption of family as a natural form. Instead, Bourdieu defines family as a social construct that is actively produced, maintained, and recognized through the social practice and the legal system. Additionally, with MDA as the method to examine visual and narrative elements of the family representation in the film.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Reinforcing Traditional Family Ideology

This section discusses how *Spellbound* (2024) reinforces the traditional family ideology. As stated by Canetto (1996), traditional family ideology assumes a normal family as a first-marriage heterosexual couple with their biological children, the woman as a wife responsible for child and domestic work, and the husband as economic provider and authority, thereby upholding unity through parental love and collective responsibilities. The concept of traditional family has long been seen as a center in many societies, where values of love, responsibility, and sticking together are taught, including in Indonesian family context (Purba, 2022). Parental love serves not simply as affection but as the foundation to maintain the family unity, while responsibility and shared struggles transform into collective obligations that reinforce the family's unity at the same time (Parsons, 1955; Pew Research Center, 2014).

3.1.1. Parental Love as the Foundation of Family Unity

Figure 1 shows the moment after they finally arrive in the Lake of Light, which is the place to break the curse. When King Solon and Queen Ellsmere try to get closer to the lake, but the lake keeps moving away from them every time they take a step. Suddenly, the shining water of the lake rises as if forming a mirror. They see the truth of what happened through the reflection of the lake. The reflection reveals that they became monsters because they had argued and let the anger consume them, the Darkness changed them into a monstrous form. After they know what truly happened, King Solon and Queen Ellsmere tell Princess Ellian that they cannot get back together as it was before. Knowing that, Princess Ellian overflows with anger and the Darkness traps her.



Figure 1. King Solon and Queen Ellsmere Save Princess Ellian

Figure 1 shows how the Lake of Light is in the rock shaped like an enormous hand cradling a shining water. The shape of the cradling hand constructs a visual metaphor for protection and care (Okafor, 2015). Shapes and forms construct meaning not through their material properties but via cultural representational systems, where social actors use conceptual and linguistic codes to symbolize protection or unity, as in objects functioning symbolically rather than reflectively (Hall, 1997). This symbolic "hand" becomes the environment in which parental love is performed and made visible. When King Solon and Queen Ellsmere break the rock together, the scene constructs traditional family ideology through their synchronized action.

The moment when King Solon and Queen Ellsmere break the rock together in Figure 1 reinforce the symbolism of protection and care. Their synchronized action visually represents cooperation and shared parental responsibility. Even though the parents were previously divided and distant, they reconnect physically and emotionally for the sake of their child. This togetherness activates what Bourdieu calls a *habitus* on family as a *well-founded fiction* by putting aside personal differences to conform to the socially accepted parental unity. Figure 3.1 turns parental cooperation into the central mechanism that restores the family. Their unity is not spoken, it is made meaningful through their shared effort to save Princess Ellian, their daughter.

KING SOLON & QUEEN ELLSMERE : (singing) "We forgot to say how much we love you and that we always will till mountains fall and fade away and all the stars turn cold and gray." (Jenson, 2024, 01:27:58)

While trying to save their daughter, King Solon and Queen Ellsmere singing the words above to make Princess Ellian realize how much they love her. In this scene, they openly express their love and regret through the song addressed to their daughter. The words function as a symbolic moment of reconciliation in which parents acknowledge their failure to express affection in the past.

This supports the idea of how words can act as a powerful moment of institutional repair (Bourdieu, 1996). King Solon and Queen Ellsmere's words are direct performance of family as a *labour of institution*, ongoing work to produce and reproduce the emotional bonds that make the family real. By openly acknowledging their previous failure by saying "we forgot to say," King Solon and Queen Ellsmere participate in the *continuous creation of the obliged affections*–a constant maintenance work involving countless acts of reaffirmation and reinforcement–that stabilize their family. The poetic promise "we always will till mountains fall and fade away and all the stars turn cold and gray", recreate the emotional foundation of the family. Their emotional performance pulls the family back together, reinforcing the *force of fusion*, the actions that keep members united.

3.1.2 Family Responsibility and Collective Struggle

Furthermore, Figure 2 supports the idea of how Princess Ellian takes her parents responsibilities to keep it looking fine in the society. She signs official papers, meets the people of the kingdom, and greets them with a smile while her parents only appear as wooden mannequin figures. Meanwhile, Princess Ellian sees her friends freely playing with the flying cat-birds, showing how she would rather do something else, instead of taking on adult responsibilities during the collective struggle. Figure 2 constructs how Princess Ellian carries her parents' workload to keep everything looking normal in society. When she says "someone's gotta answer the call and 'someone' is always me" supports the data of a child stepping into parental roles to maintain the family's stability and protect the family's public image.



Figure 2. Princess Ellian Takes the Responsibility of Her Parents

PRINCESS ELLIAN : (singing) "And meanwhile there are papers to sign, troops to inspect, meetings galore to restore what's been wrecked. People to help, laws to decree. And true, there's tons I'd rather do, but someone's gotta answer the call and "someone" is always me." (Jenson, 2024, 00:06:03)

Princess Ellian's phrases on the data above reinforces the traditional family ideology by showing how individual desire must be set aside for family responsibility and collective struggle. As Princess

Ellian mentions the tasks she must perform by signing papers, inspecting troops, restoring what has been wrecked, she demonstrates how family acts as *the labour of institution* by keeping the family functioning as a unified unit. Princess Ellian says "there's tons I'd rather do" but still has to "answer the call" shows how she accepts the moral obligation to combine her individual goals with the family's collective interests, constructing how the family functions as a realized category. By taking over her parents' duties, she becomes the agent of the family's *site of social reproduction*, by protecting its economic and symbolic capital while holding its public image. These are aligned with the family as the *well-founded fiction* on how her labor covers up the *force of fission* that might break the family apart. Instead, Princess Ellian strengthens the *force of fusion* that connects them through obligation, sacrifice, and shared struggle.

3.2 Challenge the Traditional Family Ideology

This section addresses how the film challenges the traditional family ideology? Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework of *habitus* on family as a realized category, a social construction that feels natural because of repeated practices and shared belief in family. This section argues that *Spellbound* (2024) represents family moves beyond physical unity, biological continuity, and traditional parental hierarchy. The film constructs how even when a family's external structure collapses, its emotional logic remains rooted in the *habitus* of Princess Ellian as a child. Through Princess Ellian's journey, the narrative challenges the assumption that a "normal" family must have constant togetherness, perfect harmony, or unbroken parental guidance. Instead, *Spellbound* (2024) constructs the family unit can be rebuilt, reinterpreted, and sustained through separation, child agency, and emotional growth.

3.2.1 Redefining Family Through Separation

Furthermore, Figure 3 occurs when Princess Ellian is attempting to escape the Darkness after she knows that her parents are not going back together as it was before, which threatens to consume her and transform her into a monster. To do so, she must release all the negative emotions she holds, including her anger towards her parents (Jonauskaite et al., 2020a; Jonauskaite et al., 2020b). After King Solon and Queen Ellsmere try to convince Princess Ellian that they truly love her, Princess Ellian begins to accept the truth. In Figure 3, she confronts an image of her younger self, which symbolizes her *habitus* of happy memories she shared with her parents when they were still together. By accepting her parents' separation without losing the emotional bonds between them, Princess Ellian helps redefine what family can look like. This representation challenges the traditional family ideology by constructing the broader shift of flexible family forms in contemporary society (Bansal & Sharma, 2024). By accepting that her parents are no longer together but still love her, Princess Ellian challenges the idea of an ideal family and shows that family can be fine after separation.



Figure 3. Princess Ellian Makes Peace with Her Younger Self

PRINCESS ELLIAN : (singing) "I wish there was a way back to the way it was before. But families don't all grow in one straight line. And since we can't just stay back, well, it's time to close that door. Don't be scared. We'll be fine." (Jenson, 2024, 01:28:50)

Princess Ellian's gesture of hugging her younger self in Figure 3 deepens the meaning of healing that can occur after her parents communicate why they cannot go back to the way it was before. The opening line constructs a desire to revert to the objective family as she knew before. This longing is driven by the *habitus* she acquired, which was based on the perception of her family unity. The younger Princess Ellian represents the *habitus* if the girl is harmed by parental conflict, while the older Princess Ellian has made a peace that the "way back" to the old family structure no longer exists, even though there is a sense of longing. Princess Ellian's *habitus* is used to see and feel her family together, as it is shown by the glimpse of her younger self memory while she traps inside the Darkness. Yet, the older Princess Ellian's embrace signals healing, by the line "families don't all grow in one straight line". It challenges the traditional ideology that a family is something that must unify, continuous togetherness, and lifelong marital cohesion to ensure emotional security and proper childrearing (Sear, 2021). Instead, Figure 3 presents separations as a necessary path to grow.

The visual between her past and present selves signals that Princess Ellian's sense of self and belonging or her *habitus* can reorganize itself without requiring her parents to return to the old form of the family. Princess Ellian's acceptance and reassuring her little self by saying "Don't be scared. We'll be fine", she constructs a new sense of security that no longer depends on her parents' unity. The line challenges traditional family ideology by proving emotional bonds and belonging can continue even when the traditional structure breaks. This constructs the increasing diversity and complexity of family forms, where emotional connection is something important despite structural changes in the family (Pearce et al., 2018). Ultimately, separation becomes the stimulus that allows Princess Ellian to construct a new nontraditional understanding of family.

3.2.2 Child Agency and Emotional Autonomy

The situation leading up to Princess Ellian's emotional outburst as the climax of this film. Princess Ellian's line occurs at the Lake of Light, the place she had been striving to reach, believing it would fix everything and restore her monster parents to human form. After King Solon and Queen Ellsmere see their reflection that the Darkness curses them because of their constant anger and fighting, they tell Princess Ellian that they can not be together anymore and ask for some time for them to figure out what they are going to do. This decision made without acknowledging Princess Ellian's endless sacrifices and efforts to save them, leads to her immediate and forceful rejection of her passive role as she sings her feelings over being forgotten and marginalized by their conflict.



Figure 4. Princess Ellian Gets Angry of Her Parents Decision

PRINCESS ELLIAN : (singing) "I played my part, I gave and gave. So good, so calm, so sweet, so brave. And now that your lives are all set, look what you do. Think I'll forgive, smile, and forget? Well, sorry, I'm through. You made your plans without me. You never cared about me. No! It's always about you and you. Not about me." (Jenson, 2024, 01:20:38)

Princess Ellian's line portrays how child agency and emotional autonomy challenge the traditional ideology, as Princess Ellian forcefully rejects the labour of institution that demand her sacrifice and subordination. As Bourdieu argues about family functions as a socially constructed yet collectively recognized principle of construction of collective reality, a tacit law (*nomos*) which establishes what and how a normal family should like.

By the line "I played my part, I gave and gave. So good, so calm, so sweet, so brave," she reveals how she has long fulfilled the demanded obliged affections. She has performed the labour of institution to keep the family together. Yet, when her parents make important decisions without her, she exposes how they have used their power in the domestic field to prioritize themselves as a site of social reproduction. Princess Ellian's complaint, "You made your plans without me. You never cared about me," constructs that the normality in family becomes an unfair burden only on her.

Additionally, Princess Ellian's emotional autonomy shows by refusing "And now that your lives are all set, look what you do. Think I'll forgive, smile, and forget? Well, sorry, I'm through." She rejects the idea that one must always maintain the family's unity through self-sacrifice. Princess Ellian's expression while saying those words is full of anger. Her furrowed eyebrows, sharp, furious eyes, and tense mouth toward her parents visually produce the meaning of a child who refuses her assigned role. The Darkness rising behind her, the strong wind swirling around her body, the sky gets dark, symbolically constructs the emotional weight she carries.

Princess Ellian's gesture by pointing directly at her parents while other hand is clenched tightly communicates resistance, creating a visual of a child asserting personal boundaries and moral accusations. When she sings "It's always about you and you," the gesture becomes a visual rejection of parental authority, breaking the expectation that children must silently accept parents' decisions. At this moment, Princess Ellian takes away emotional work that usually keeps the family integrated and introduces a *force of fission*–that threatens the family's unity. Her line becomes a clear, performative act that challenges the belief that the family is naturally unified. Instead, she shows it is something constructed. In contrast, King Solon and Queen Ellsmere shocked and worried expressions constructs them suddenly destabilized by the reversal power. All these visual choices work together to construct Princess Ellian not as a child who must obey her parents but as an agent who also disrupts the family norm. Figure 4 and the dialogue embodying the emotional autonomy of Princess Ellian words that is in contrast with traditional family ideology.

4. Conclusions

Based on the findings, *Spellbound* reinforces traditional family ideologies by constructing the family unit around the fundamental concepts of parental love and collective responsibility. This representation constructs the traditional family ideology that emphasizes unity, commitment, and shared responsibilities among family members as the foundation of family stability. Parental love is consistently presented as the essential foundation and *force of fusion*–work to achieve and maintain family unity–that stabilizes the family, even when its objective structure is threatened. This foundation is demonstrated through the parents' recognition of Princess Ellian, which functions as the *labour of institution.* Furthermore, the film upholds the traditional expectation of collective struggle. Princess Ellian embodies family *habitus* of duty, actively taking on adult responsibilities, protecting the family's symbolic capital to prevent the family from collapsing (*force of fission*), reinforcing the need for the family to maintain a united and its image in the society.

Conversely, *Spellbound* fundamentally challenges traditional family ideology by redefining the family structure through the negotiation of the changing family form by separation and child's ability to act. Unlike many animated films, *Spellbound* explicitly portrays the process of separation, constructing it as a productive decision. This representation constructs the growing recognition of diverse and flexible family forms in the last few years, in which emotional connection continues despite the structural changes in the household. Princess Ellian's ultimate acceptance of her parents living in two separate buildings confirms the emotional bonds can continue even when the physical structure breaks, requiring her *habitus* to still stay on the parental love as the foundation of the family. Child

agency and emotional autonomy are powerfully highlighted as Princess Ellian rejects the subordinate role expected by the traditional family ideology. Her emotional climax functions as forceful rejection of the *labour of the institution* that demanded her self-sacrifice, effectively challenging and destabilizing the parental hierarchy within the domestic field.

Furthermore, in the representation this study emphasizes that *Spellbound* functions not simply as a reflection of reality but as representation that actively constructs meaning, particularly by representing child agency and emotional autonomy that are often underexplored in academic research on family. Children are motivated to perform not just in their own interests as individuals but also in a way that helps their parents and the family as a whole (Cheung, 2021). This film represents a different perspective on the concept of family, moving the focus not only to parents in the family. It is about child agency and emotional autonomy. The child becomes an active agent shaping family meaning, not only positioned as a passive member.

All in all, *Spellbound* represents family as a complex social construct that incorporates both enduring traditional values and evolving contemporary realities. The film's multimodal portrayal develops the understanding of family by blending cultural symbols of love and obligation with themes of separation. Despite its non-traditional structure, the film remains strong on parental love as an emotional anchor, representing family as a dynamic social construct sustained by love, duty, and adaptive form of family beyond rigid unity. This representation answers the research question by showing that family in *Spellbound* is not fixed but continuously constructed through emotional labour, symbolic, recognition. The form of the family is changed, yet the *habitus* in the family remains the same as the movie constructs parental love as the foundation of the family.

In line with academic research on the transformation of contemporary families, the family structures have become increasingly diverse. Even though the form is changing, emotional connection or love in family relationships remain strong. These studies show that separation and restructured household does not necessarily weaken family ties, but instead reshape how unity is maintained. Additionally, in Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were* book of the historical transformation of the American family, shows that the meaning of a "good family" is shifting. Unity is no longer defined only by an intact household, but by emotional well-being and mutual recognition. Separation is validated not as failure, but as growth. This indicates that the family form of the American family is gradually shifting and becoming adaptive. While the *habitus* accepts the new forms, the *habitus* is still grounded in parental love as the emotional anchor.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author(s) Contribution

Ruth Maria designed the study and wrote the manuscript. Henny Indarwaty supervised the research and revised the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version.

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