

The Interpretations of Morality and Ideology in Wes Anderson's Film *Isle of Dogs*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the interpretations of morality and ideology in Wes Anderson's film *Isle of Dogs*. The research employs a qualitative method with the data collection technique of note-taking by watching the film, noting the dialogues of scenes related to the themes of morality and ideology. Data analysis is conducted by examining the characters and plot of the film in relation to the concepts of morality and ideology based on ethical theories and structuralism of ideology. Morality in this film reflects the tension between individual values and collective decisions in society, while ideology is portrayed as a system of power that dominates political decisions. Through the analysis of morality and ideology, it is found that the characters in the film are caught in a conflict between actions that are considered morally right and the ideologies they follow. The film critiques social and political structures through the messages conveyed by characters like Mayor Kobayashi and Chief, who represent a larger system of power. In conclusion, this analysis highlights how the moral messages in the film are connected to ideological decisions that can either worsen or improve the state of society.

Keywords: Ideology and Morality, Interpretation, Isle of Dogs, Wes Anderson

INTRODUCTION

The *Isle of Dogs* is a stop-motion animated film released in 2018 and directed by Wes Anderson. Set in Megasaki, a fictional city in Japan in 2038, the story portrays a world where a canine flu epidemic leads the government to exile all dogs to Trash Island, a wasteland filled with garbage. This decision is driven by Mayor Kobayashi, a politician harboring a longstanding grudge against dogs. Atari Kobayashi, a 12-year-old orphan and the mayor's

ward, takes matters into his own hands by stealing a plane to reach Trash Island in search of his beloved dog, Spots (Anderson, 2018; De la Prida, 2022; Hathaway, 2024). On the island, he encounters a pack of stray dogs led by Chief, a stubborn but capable alpha dog. Together, they embark on a journey to locate Spots, confronting numerous challenges, including a political conspiracy orchestrated by the Megasaki government.

Morality refers to a code of conduct, about what actions are considered right and what is wrong. This issue is much discussed through ethics in which it explores philosophical values of doing such good things. In literary studies, perspective of morality is intended to see whether such characters and/or ambience in literary works play around the concepts within being good or bad. Meanwhile, an ideology is a system of beliefs or doctrines that intend to guide social groups or individuals, most often with political or sociological connotations. Such ideology is so Marxian since it is always related to power. Ideology is not merely about set of ideas, but it is deeply rooted in the conceptions of dominations and decision-making process. Ideology and morality are interconnected because most people subscribe to a certain ideology based on their moral convictions, although that is not necessarily true. Both morality and ideology may intertwine each other because ideology may become such moral values that tell people to do things. It is quite the same in reverse where such morality may be realized as ideology (Maulida; 2022).

This paper aims to investigate perspectives of morality and ideology in *Isle of Dogs*. By underlining those two aspects, this film can be enriched to show the crucial points of multidisciplinary perspectives in film and literary studies. Moreover, this article is also used to underscore more about how doing such good things may be morally true but ideologically incorrect, and in reverse as well.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with descriptive analysis,

where data is obtained through literature studies. Qualitative research begins with data collection, followed by analysis. The theoretical framework is used as a guide to ensure that the focus of the research aligns with the facts found in the field. In the same line with Cahyaningtyas and Wahyono (2024), this theoretical framework also serves to provide an overview of the research setting and as a discussion of the research results. The data in this study is the influence of morality and ideology in Wes Anderson's film *Isle of Dogs*. Data collection is done using the note-taking technique. The data analysis technique is carried out through the following steps: (1) watching and analyzing the film *Isle of Dogs* to identify themes of morality and ideology, (2) noting scenes and dialogues related to moral and ideological conflicts in the film, (3) analyzing scenes and dialogues related to these moral and ideological conflicts, (4) finally, drawing conclusions based on the analysis results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Morality, Ideology, and Its Intertwinements

Morality and ideology are related concepts, but they refer to different aspects of a person's or group's beliefs and values. Morality refers to the principles, norms, and values that guide individuals or groups in determining what is right and wrong, good and bad. It encompasses judgments about actions and intentions based on ethical considerations. This sense can be both individual and societal, but it is used to be considered universal or grounded in human experience (Aytac & Rossi, 2023; Enke et al.,

2023; Nielsen, 2021). Such universal issues of universal ethics are so deontological, while the particular ones tend to be based on consequences of such deeds. For example, compassion should be done universally. However, its consequences may become vary if it is done towards bad people.

The idea of morality then can be influenced by culture, religion, philosophy, and personal experiences. Typically focuses on individual behavior and interpersonal relationships, morality plays around conscience in human mind to direct to goodness. That conscience gives guidance to be better and to choose the right over the wrong deeds (Aytac & Rossi, 2023; Enke et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2021). People will say that conscience may never be wrong, but it indeed may bring different consequences if followed. The cause is always good, but its effects are not always the same.

Ideology is a system of ideas, beliefs, and values that forms the basis of a social, economic, or political theory. It provides a framework for understanding the world and often prescribes how society should be organized. This system works through power and its exercise. It is commonly believed in contemporary political philosophy that ideology is not static and owned, but it moves through performative actions of the doers (Alsaad et al., 2021; Aytac & Rossi, 2023; Zmigrod, 2022). In this sense, ideology is not something merely essential, but is also related to its existence. In other words, ideology is not merely a value, but it is nothing but practice of everyday life.

Matter of ideology is indeed more systematic and comprehensive

than morality. It is encompassing a wide range of beliefs rather than merely about talking about good and bad things. Meanwhile, even morality can be one part of ideology especially if it is related to values being practiced. Ideology often includes specific goals and policies aimed at achieving a certain vision of society and it can be more rigid and dogmatic, sometimes leading to conflict between different ideological groups (Alsaad et al., 2021; Aytac & Rossi, 2023; Zmigrod, 2022). It is because ideology is not static but moves around and defining the ideas between us and others. It is not only protecting internal aspects, but also expelling others.

The intertwinements of ideology and morality is that morality is primarily concerned with ethical behavior and individual actions, while ideology is about broader systems of thought and societal organization. The flexibility may also be different since moral beliefs can be more fluid and personal, whereas ideologies tend to be more structured and collective. In its applications, morality often guides personal conduct, while ideology influences group behavior and policy decisions (Alsaad et al., 2021; Aytac & Rossi, 2023; Zmigrod, 2022). Both morality and ideology shape how individuals and groups view the world and act within it. However, morality is more about personal ethics, whereas ideology is a broader framework for understanding and organizing societal beliefs and practices.

Analysis of Ideology and Morality in Isle of Dogs

To analyze morality and ideology in *Isle of Dogs*, literary devices of intention and interpretation are

necessarily explored. Intention and interpretation in literature explores the degree to which the audience understanding and interpret a work according to the view of the author (Alvim & Quaioti, 2024; Anderson, 2018; Pasopati et al., 2024b). This post becomes relevant from the position of Wes Anderson's film to analyze how director's intentions were translated and framed through the audience's lens.

Wes Anderson is a director known for a singular style. He is famous for his uniquely designed aesthetic and deep stories in his films. Anderson seems to be trying to tell a story about loyalty, the struggle against authoritarian oppression, and a critique of authoritarianism in *Isle of Dogs*. The alienation of dogs to Trash Island by Megasaki's government serves as a metaphor for society's marginalization of certain groups (Anderson, 2018; De la Prida, 2022; Hathaway, 2024). Anderson's intent may be obvious, but an audience's reading of it can change based on where someone comes from, including what they experienced or studied. Some audiences could view the film as a comment on dehumanization in politics, while others could see it as a simple tale about humans' and pets' bond. These interpretations show that the meaning of a work of art is not just defined by the author's intention but also by the personal views of those who engage with it (Alvim & Quaioti, 2024; Anderson, 2018; Pasopati et al., 2024b).

Central to the film and its dialogues between dogs and humans is Chief, a stray dog who initially refuses to interact with humans, and who tells Atari "I bite". Atari's act of trust and effort of love in turn softens

Chief's heart. This straightforward conversation can be seen as a symbol depicting fear and self-defense born from trauma and how trust and love can transcend these walls (Anderson, 2018; De la Prida, 2022; Hathaway, 2024). Perhaps he wanted to reveal transformation in character through this exchange, but it only served to unlock what the audiences might themselves be reliving their own accounts of trust, and healing emotionally. It is actually possibilities in a film that make a film important as a literary work.

In the context of human behavior, morality is a set of values that guides people to decide what is good or bad even right or wrong. Philosophers speak of morality in two senses; rooted in reason and universal maxims like the categorical imperative or in utilitarianism by judging the morality of actions according to the consequences of those actions (Alvim & Quaioti, 2024; Anderson, 2018; Pasopati et al., 2024b). Wes Anderson's film *Isle of Dogs* dramatizes morality as it pertains to human-animal relationships, and demonstrates how the characters' moral actions illustrate the conflict between personal interests and the greater good (Anderson, 2018; Nathan, 2025; Wijaya et al., 2024). The film's morality includes loyalty, sacrifice and responsibility to other beings, human and animal, considered useless by society.

Mayor Kobayashi: "We have an outbreak of dog flu. Canine saturation has reached epidemic proportions. An outbreak of snout fever rips through the city. In order to prevent the spread of disease, the Mayor has signed a

decree calling for a quarantine."

(Anderson, 2018)

From a utilitarian standpoint, Mayor Kobayashi's refusal to consider alternatives to extermination can be construed to make sense. He believes that excluding the dogs is the "best" move to save humans. However, this is an immoral action when measured on a rights-based scale, where dogs too are living beings and have a right to a good life (Anderson, 2018; Nathan, 2025; Pasopati et al., 2024b). Audiences might see this choice as a critique of authoritarianism, in which morality is frequently warped to accommodate the interests of the ruler while disregarding larger ethical implications. Wes Anderson plays with this dilemma as an invitation to reflect on the need to focus on the moral implications of large-scale policies on marginalized populations.

The above sense shows that Mayor Kobayashi embraces ideology to prevent such disease to be spread. That ideology is logical since it includes ideas of us and excludes matters of others. In that case, what he says is aimed for collective issues since it includes matter of societal perspectives (Alvim & Quaioti, 2024; Anderson, 2018; Pasopati et al., 2024b). Moreover, what he tells to the people is such morality to be obeyed by the people. If people do not nod to that value, the individuals will be expelled. So, what he says is containing morality too since it forces individuals to be conformed or be expelled from commonness of society.

Rex: *"We are a pack of scary, indestructible alpha dogs."* (Anderson, 2018)

In this dialogue, the morality is communitarian, how individual actors are evaluated or judged primarily in relation to social relationships and social solidarity. The dogs' solidarity in times of trouble shows that morality is often located in networks, in collective relations, where group welfare supersedes the interests of individuals. What Rex says is affecting individuals, as it is related to morality of being alpha dogs. He points out to all of members in the pack as individuals who should stay strong in facing any obstacle.

Meanwhile, Rex's saying is also ideological since it also excludes others different from his pack. His saying is a set of values in being alpha dogs. He sets such rules to be followed, that is being indestructible. His pack must be strong because ideology tends to be more structured and collectively applied to anyone. In its applications, the pack's ideology also guides each's personal conduct while influences group behavior and policy decisions. The pack's values view the world and act within it especially in how to put best effort in understanding and organizing societal beliefs and practices.

In general, ideology can be understood as a collection of ideas, fundamental beliefs, and values that are dynamic in nature and provide direction and purpose in the life of a nation and its people. The film *Isle of Dogs* by Wes Anderson illustrates ideological themes through its storyline. In the film, the government of Megasaki City, led by Mayor Kobayashi, banishes all dogs to Trash Island under the pretext of a canine flu epidemic that could spread to humans (Anderson, 2018; Martinelli & Lankauskaitė, 2022; Yuliastuti et

al., 2021). This action reflects the use of propaganda by authoritarian regimes to manipulate public opinion and justify repressive actions against certain groups. Furthermore, the film highlights resistance against oppressive power. Characters like Atari and the group of dogs striving to oppose the government's policy demonstrate efforts to uphold values of humanity and justice. This portrays ideological dynamics between authoritarianism and public resistance in a political context.

Atari: "Spots, it's me, Atari. I came to find you." (Anderson, 2018)

The quotation above shows how Atari demonstrates an individual's determination to act based on personal motivation. His statement reflects how he prioritizes an interpersonal relationship with Spots above societal norms or rules that might restrict his actions. This is an expression of the ideology of individualism, where personal decisions and courage to face risks are central values (Anderson, 2018; Martinelli & Lankauskaitė, 2022; Yuliastuti et al., 2021). The ideology of individualism emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and autonomy in existentialist perspective. Atari is so strong that he is brave to say that humans are entirely responsible for their own choices. Indeed, Atari's decision to search for Spots is a concrete example of this existential responsibility. His actions are driven by emotional recognition of Spots, which aligns with concept of the struggle for recognition, where acknowledgment of personal relationships becomes a driving force for action.

Chief: "I'm not doing this because I like you. I'm doing this because I have a responsibility to my pack." (Anderson, 2018)

Chief's dialogue emphasizes collectivist values. In this context, his actions are not influenced by personal feelings towards a specific individual but by his responsibility to his group (pack). This reflects an ideology that places group interests above personal preferences. The collectivist ideology in Chief's dialogue reflects cultural hegemony, where group values (like solidarity and responsibility) become the accepted norm and are internalized by individuals. Chief's actions are not driven by external coercion but by his belief that maintaining balance within the group is his duty (Anderson, 2018; Aytac & Rossi, 2023; Zmigrod, 2022). This dialogue also illustrates how individuals become subjects of ideology through interpellation (ideological hailing). Chief feels "called" to fulfill his role as a leader, even though he personally dislikes the individual he is helping.

These two dialogues above reflect an ideological conflict between individualism and collectivism. Atari acts based on emotional impulses and personal relationships. This often reflects a liberal or existentialist perspective, where freedom and personal responsibility are prioritized (Anderson, 2018; Aytac & Rossi, 2023; Zmigrod, 2022). Chief, on the other hand, takes a more pragmatic and structured approach, where actions are based on social roles and obligations to the community.

CONCLUSION

Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* is a richly meaningful work that combines his distinctive aesthetics with deep philosophical, moral, and ideological themes. From the perspective of intention and interpretation, Anderson uses this story to convey critiques of authoritarianism, marginalization, and the importance of loyalty and love, while allowing the audience the freedom to interpret these messages according to their own experiences and viewpoints. In terms of morality, the film portrays the dilemma between personal interests and the greater good. Wes Anderson invites audiences to reflect on the moral implications of large-scale policies, particularly those

affecting marginalized groups. The characters demonstrate how solidarity and responsibility can underpin moral actions that transcend individual interests. From an ideological perspective, *Isle of Dogs* highlights the conflict between individualism and collectivism. Characters like Atari emphasize the importance of freedom and personal responsibility, while Chief reflects collectivist values that prioritize the group's welfare. The film also critiques propaganda and manipulation by authoritarian regimes while showcasing themes of resistance to oppression as a struggle for justice and humanity.

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