THEATRE PERFORMANCE COMMUNICATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THEATRE SEMIOTICS

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan membahas proses komunikasi elemen-elemen pertunjukan yang mencakup sistem tanda kata, mimik, nada, gesture, gerak, make-up, gaya rambut, kosum, prop, setting, tata cahaya, musik, efek suara atau bunyi yang disampaikan para penyaji pertunjukan (performer) kepada khalayak penonton. Keberhasilan sebuah pertunjukan teater sesungguhnya bergantung kepada berhasil tidaknya performer mengomunikasikan berbagai tanda tersebut kepada penonton. Kajian ini menggunakan perpekstif semiotika teater. Tulisan ini diharapkan dapat membantu para kreator teater dalam mengomunikasikan kode-kode dan pesan-pesan pertunjukan kepada penonton. Dengan cara demikian, sebuah pertunjukan teater akan dapat menjadi komunikasi yang produktif antara kreator teater dengan audiens.

Kata Kunci: *kode, komunikasi, semiotika teater, tanda*

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the processes of communicating performance elements including word sign systems, facial expressions, tones, gestures, motions, make-up, hair styles, costumes, props, settings, lighting, music, voice or sound effects from the performers to the audience. The success of a theatrical performance actually depends on the successful communication of these elements by the performers. This study adopts the perspective of theater semiotics. Hopefully this article can benefit theater creators in communicating performance codes and messages to the audience. Thus, a theatrical performance can be a productive communication between them and the audience.

Keywords: code, communication, semiotics of theatre, sign

INTRODUCTION

The process of communication in performance art, including theatre, plays an important role in guaranteeing the success of a performance. Through this process, the elements of performance such as word sign system, facial expressions, tones, gestures, motions, make-up, hair styles, costumes, props, settings, lighting, music, sound effect or sounds can be communicated to audience. In theatre semiotics, these elements are called theater signs.

As is already known, everything presented to audience in the frame of theatre is a "sign". The sign reading is done through our understanding of the world. For example, we "read" people on the road based on their styles such as messy hair, rumpled clothes, and unfit shoes, which signify poverty, while bowler hat, neat clothes, and umbrella signify that the person comes from an urban area. Although naturally we are involved in such kinds of "readings" because of our knowledge

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about clothing appearance code, we do not know the real meaning of them all.

In the Western theatre tradition in the twentieth century, the responsibility of sign system organizing in theater is on the director's hand. On the one hand, a performer is an initiator of the language sign system; while a director holds control over all forms of theatre. His duty is organizing theater signing system (lighting, decoration, property, etc) in a modified process which is harmonious with the production of a text (Aston & Savona, 1991:100). If the director fails in this task, the performance may not be understood by the audience. Sign organizing system will cause failure of artistic director badly.

Ideally, the signs in theater must combine two things as follows. Firstly, they have to be able to deliver messages. Secondly, they have to be able to make hierarchy of the messages delivered. In film semiotics, it is widely used as an important tool or the "eye" of the camera to assist or direct meaning. The eye of the camera selects the subject to be watched so that it directs our attention to the processes of meaning creation (Aston & Savona, 1991:101). In theatre, there is no medium for such mediation. All that is spread out on the stage can be observed at once.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the communication process of the elements of theatre performance to the audience as well as to examine the restrictions faced in the process of communication. Hopefully, this article can benefit theatre creators such as performers and directors in communicating performance codes and messages to the audience. Thus, a theathrical performance can be a productive communication between the performers and the audience.

ASPECTS OF THEATRE SIGNS DENOTATIONS

Indeed, besides denotation aspect, the signs of theatre unavoidably obtain secondary meanings for audiences who relate them to social, moral, and ideological values which are known in the community in which the performers and the audience become its parts. In regard to that matter,

Bogatyrev (Keir Elam, 1991:10), a semiotician, says that theatre costume and set as they are used on the stage often become the signs directing to one of signs characterizing costume and set in theatre events. Actually, each sign is a sign appointing to a sign and not a sign appointing to a material thing. For example, a war costume, for certain audience, is considered as "bravery", "virility", "bad taste", etc.

Furthermore, Bogatyrev (Elam, 1991:10) mentions the signs designated as "connotations". The mechanism of connotation in language and other sign systems have been frequently discussed by various semiotic experts. However, it must be admitted that the most satisfying formulation is Hjelmslev's formulation that defines a "connotative semiotics" as a semiotics whose expression field is semiotics (Noth, 1990:71-73). Connotation is a parasitical semantic function that places signifier aspect as second-order relation. For example, the crown worn by a king has several secondary meanings such as "greatness", "coup d'état", etc.

It is important that every aspect of performance is managed by dialectics of denotations such as setting, the actor's body, the actor's movement, and his pronunciation which all determine and are determined by a network of primary and secondary meanings which are varied constantly (Elam, 1991:11). A certain signifier is not only possible to contain a certain meaning, but also second-order meanings in a performance. For example, a dress can show the socio-economic, psychological, even moral characteristics of its user.

Certainly, in theatre semiotics, connotation is not something unique. On the contrary, the ability of the audience to catch the important second-order meanings depends on extra-theatrical and cultural values contained by particular objects, certain discourse mode or certain behavioral forms. Socially, the audience are not aware of the meanings they give to the theatre phenomenon, but theatre communication enables these meanings to have an influence on the practical function, that is everything functions just until the level of its own meaning (Nur Sahid, 1999:91). Based on the values codified socially, theatre semiotics always connotes

'itself'. This means that connotative aspect prevails on entire performance enabling the audience to classify everything presented to them from normal social praxis and therefore they consider a performance as 'a network of meanings' or 'a text'.

Regarding the mobility of the signs, Bogatyrev (Elam, 1991:12) says that a signifier can have various semantic meanings which are not only at the level of connotation, but also sometimes at the level of denotation. In addition, Bogatyrev gives an example that one stage item can have different signs depending on the context of its emergence. It is because the signs of every object experience transformation fast and variously. It is possible in a scene; there is common necklace, while in the next scene that necklace converted to be a chain tying hands. It is also possible in a set of a performance that this necklace functions as a wall, but in another scene it becomes the fence of a garden without any significant modification. The flexibility of such denotation is complemented by the mobility of play's functions which is full of a single physical item (Sahid, 1999: 91).

Jindrich Honzl (Elam, 1991:13) states that any stage signifier can give sign to the group of any phenomena. This means that there is no correlations of representation determined absolutely The play's scene is not always performed through space tools, architectural, pictorial (screen), but it can be indicated through gesture (as in pantomime) through verbal indications or acoustics tools. Besides, there is no permanent law that regulates the representation of the performer on whether it should be human. The actors can be in the form of puppets like in a shadow puppet performance that is popular in Java and also can be in the form of other objects. The mobility factor or sign transformation does not depend only on "interchangeable characteristic" from the elements of stage, but also alternating substitution of sign system or codes (Elam, 1991:15). If there is a change of indicators of a scene by gesture, for example, certain semantic unit like a kind of "door", it can be signified by linguistic or gestural system, not only by architectural system as in pantomime.

THEATRE AS SEMIOTICS SYSTEM

All of the signs involved in theatre as explained above actually also has a function as the signifiers of signs. This was first proposed by P. Bogatyrev (Lichte, 1991:129). After that, many theatre semioticians have adopted it. So far, it has been prevailed in theatre that the signs signified relate to the material of theatre itself. For example, a language sign can signify a language sign, external appearance sign can signify an external appearance sign, prop sign signify a prop sign and so on. The transformation of an object into a theatre sign enables us to make a clear perception about the characteristics owned or considered owned by the object as a sign.

The occurrence of the signs mobility in theatre is triggered by the ability functioning as the signs of the signs themselves (Lichte, 1991:131). As discussed above, the stage decoration can be changed by words, prop can be changed by gesture, gesture can be changed by sound, lighting can be changed by prop etc. It is clear that some of these various signs can be interchangeable. Therefore, the sign of rain can be signified by using sound, lighting, costume, prop or words. Raincoat can meet the same function as the sound of rain or the words sound "it is raining outside". In other words, theatre sign does not only function as the sign of the sign which is represented materially, but also functions as signifying the sign of a sign that can be random with other sign systems. In this context, the sign created by human only can be understood by human who creates and uses it (Fiske in Rajiyem and Widodo Agus Setianto, 2004).

If other aesthetics sign systems can only be articulated with special material homogenously, the capacity of those aesthetics systems can create signs based on and limited by the material itself (Lichte, 1991:131). For example, the language signs used in novel, short story, and poem cannot be changed by painting, object, gesture, etc. Paralinguistic signs cannot change the signs in painting art. Furthermore, Lichte says that a collection of non-aesthetics sign systems in a cultural community is usually characterized clearly by its ability in providing all kinds of the signs possible.

However, it must be remembered that in the context of social reality, those signs can only interchangeable until limited level. Even in some cases, those signs cannot be interchangeable. It can happen because of communication functions or practical functions which are full of non-aesthetics signs cannot be met strongly by other sign systems. For example, bicycle that I want to ride on cannot be changed by the word "bicycle" or picture of bicycle or gesture of riding bicycle. The train I want to ride on can be signified clearly by the sound of loud horn in railway station, but practical function as the vehicle cannot be changed.

The facts contained in non-aesthetics signs above are very different from the signs applied in theatre. In theatre, we can use any sign to replace another sign. It means that a certain sign can easily change other signs. So, in theatre every sign can function as the sign of a sign. Lichte says that a sign of theatre can replace other signs as long as it can adopt the different semiotics' functions.

In semiotics perspective, theatre can be defined as a collection of sign systems. The problem is to what extent this sign system is divided into the smallest elements to ensure its function as meaning trigger. This is also related to how to classify the smallest units into paradigm of categories and determination of *sintagma* relationships which unite signi-ficant units.

Theatre semiotics works by using structural principle. There are two groups working in structural principle so far. Firstly, a French semioticians coordinated by Roland Barthes. Barthes states that individual units of signs can be heterogeneous, but the meanings emerged simultaneously by those units are always similar or homogenous (Lichte, 1991:132). According to this argument, theatre shows high redundancy level because the meaning complexes are created at the same time. It means that we just need to signify one of systems involved for meaning creation without ignoring some factors which play important roles in constructing meaning.

On the other hand, semiotic experts from Poland (second group) assume that the signs realized simultaneously can really make different meanings, and overall meaning created simultaneously is really different from each meaning of individual sign (Lichte, 1991:132). This is because it is constituted as specific relationships among those meanings. This argument causes a problem, how to analyze a performance to be small simultaneous meaning units. To answer this problem, Kowzan's opinion seems relevant to this. Kowzan (Elam, 1991:47) often says that semiotics unity of a performance is a slice of elements containing signs resulted simultaneously, and one slice has the same length as the length of the shortest sign.

The next question is what is the smallest unit of the theatre sign like? Can the existence of the characters and situations following its presentation on the stage be related to the smallest unit? If we treat "characters" as the smallest meaning unit determiner, it ignores the fact that all of theatre signs cannot be made a conception as partial signs which can be classified into category of global signs of one character in all cases (Licte, 1991:133). For example, some space signs, non-verbal acoustic signs, words and gesture of actor signify not as a "certain actor", but as part of stage decoration. In contrast, the re-division of theatre performance into "situations" means that a performance that does not involve change in the characters or location must be understood entirely as the smallest unit. Each smallest element contains various signs as well. The smallest part (slice) of a theatrical performance is a scene.

The scene is a small event that encourages the development of disposition of the characters in the theater (Riantiarno, 2003:33). Patrice Pavis (1992:26-29) suggests that there are seven formula to read scenes. The seven formulas are as follows: first, scenes do not mean a repetition of the text of the play. Second, scenes are not faithful to the text of the play. Third, scenes should not disappear or dissolve themselves into the text of the show. Fourth, fundamentally, different scenes are to be born from the play of the same text. Fifth, scene simulation representation points to the symbols. Sixth, scenes are not a mix of text and a play, but it is a manifestation of a work of fiction that is

presented to the audience. Seventh, scenes are not a realization of the text of the play. Thus, the analysis of theatrical performances by theater semiotics approach should be based on signs contained in any scene that has a significant meaning. Each scene will sometimes contain multiple systems as well as system marks the sign said, the tone, mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyles, costumes, properties, setting, lighting, music system, and a sound system. But there is also a scene contains no sign of movement, gesture, light, music, sound and so on.

Skwarczynska (Lichte, 1991:133) views that theatre cannot exist without actor, so whenever he is present it means that it creates a gestural unit. It must be admitted that theatre precisely cannot exist without actor, but a performance can temporarily "eliminate" the active presence of actor. Furthermore, if the presence of actor is not needed during the performance entirely, the gestural unit cannot always be assumed as exist. It means that a gesture cannot function as "the smallest" unit, meaning that theatre can be only realized through its use.

It is clear that it is not easy to divide theatre codes into smallest units which are homogenous. Therefore, it is necessary to arrange the common rules for combining those heterogeneous theatre units. Those rules, according to Lichte (1991:134), can designate to: first, correlations among meanings made by two or more signs realized simultaneously or consecutively; second, quantitative and qualitative valences of all signs realized.

According to Lichte (1991:134), in the first case it can be concluded that there are two possibilities: first, meanings can be analogous, that are parallel each other; second, meanings can be non-analogous, that are non-parallel each other. Analogous meanings support and strengthen each other, while non-analogous meanings can point clearly each other or cannot be. For Lichte if the meanings clearly indicate to each other, so those meanings can modify each other or be contradicted each other. If the performance itself does not exist, the meanings remain not influenced, but can add each other.

Meanwhile in the second case, Lichte states that each sign system used can own each other or can own hierarchy structure. If the sign systems used by paying attention to status similarity, so the meanings made by the kind of different signs must be treated as having the same status. According to Lichte, it is based on consideration that no one sign here can have interests bigger than other signs. Furthermore, if it is used by paying attention to hierarchy structure, so one or more of those sign systems function as "the dominant ones". In turn, the meanings made by these signs must be understood as signal meanings, and the meanings constituted by the subordinate signs must be connected with those signal meaning.

Lichte (1991:135) says that a theatre genre is determined by the domination based on rule" of a certain sign system. For example, pantomime is dominated by gestural signs, opera is dominated by musical signs, and dance theatre is dominated by proxemic sign. Various existing facts show that theatre norms prevailed throughout the history of Europe Theatre are characterized by the changes happened in the formation of dominant signs. As a result, the way of forming dominant signs also function as an element of meaning. Furthermore, it is related by Lichte that if the formation of dominant signs deviates from the prevailed conventions, it must be understood as an element of meaning and must be analyzed.

THEATRE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Paradoxically, the point of departure of effective historical study on theatre communication is a negation toward its probability. A linguist from France, Georges Mounin, in 1969 once opposed the classification of relationship between the performer and the audiences as a communication relationship (Elam, 1991:33). Mounin's argument is based on the thought that communication with language media depends on the capacity of two parties or more involved in the exchange, that is the capacity in using the same codes, so that 'in turn, the message sender can be the receiver as well', 'and the receiver can be the sender'. However, in

such case, according to Mounin, cannot be applied in theatre. It is because of the process of information delivery in theatre is one-way and the roles of the participants are permanent. It means that the actors always play role as the message sender, while the audiences are as the message receiver.

Indeed, Mounin's conception about communication of theatre performance is a stimulus-response, that is, those signals are one-way and create a number of 'automatic reflexes' which in turn are not communicative throughout the same axis. This process can be represented as follows.

STIMULUS

(performance)

RESPONSE

SENDER → **RECEIVER** →

(performer/actor)
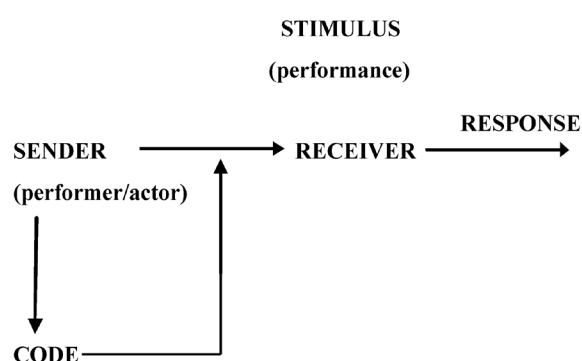
CODE

From the diagram of theatre communication above, it seems that for Mounin a receiver must be in one position using one single code and a collection of physical channels, so that he can transmitted such kind of signals.

Meanwhile, a stronger concept of theatre communication process which tends to be accepted in general states that the receiver must be familiar with the sender's code in order to be able to understand the meaning of the message. The experienced theatre audiences will be able to understand the performance precisely based on the play's codes and the theatre used by the performer.

A semiotician, Umberto Eco (1979:33), proposes an alternative to the process of communication that can be adopted for theatre communication. The following are several factors involved in the process of communication.

noise

Source→ transmitter→ signal→ channel→ signal→ receiver→message→destination

code
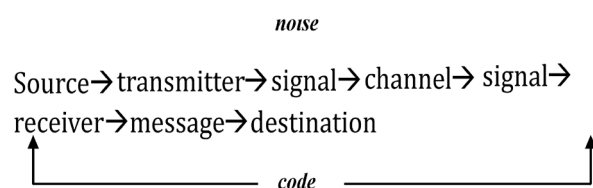
Source or information source in communication practice can be an idea in the thought of speaker or an actual event that must be communicated. Transmitter moved by the source can be in the form of the voice of narrator, telex, e-mail, computer, etc. or anything can send a signal (for example, phoneme, graphic signs etc.) throughout a physical channel such as electric wire, light wave, and sound wave. During the journey throughout channel, there are a lot of chance for channel gets noise. Then signal is taken by one receiver that can be in the form of amplifier, eye, and ears, so that it can be converted into a coherent message which can be understood as destination.

Theatre communication is based on Umberto Eco's communication chart above implies that theatre performance contains complex communication factors. In each stage of communication process, a collection of potential component raises, not only a single component. For example, we can identify performer (play text) is a practice as well as a text constituent of performance) and director whose decisions and instructions can make alternative of transmitters, that is the form adopted by the signals from transmitters and the creation of messages together with important roles from the arrangers of setting, lighting, costume, music, stage, technician and actors in their capacities as decision makers, initiator, and as idea sources (Elam, 1991:37).

In this case, various components can be put throughout communication circuit. Firstly, transmitter is manifested by the actor's body and voice together with the motonimic accessories (costume, property etc.), setting elements, lighting, musical instruments, tape recorder, film projector, etc. The signals transmitted by them like motions, voices, and electric impulses are selected and arranged sintactically based on various sign system and they move through physical channels in human communication for light wave and sound wave to smelling sense and feeling sense. One of the consequences from these components and systems are because there is no possibility to discuss a theatre message. In this context, Abraham Moles, a communication expert, states that theatre

performance consists of messages which place some channels to be used simultaneously in an aesthetics synthesis or perceptual (Elam, 1991:37).

The audiences will interpret a collection of messages from dialogues, gesture, and a set of scenes etc. As a text which is integrated according to the theatre codes, play, and culture which become the background. It, in turn, will take the role as signals transmiter to the performer that can be in the form of laugh, applaud, jape etc throughout visual and acoustic channels. Furthermore, the performer and all members will intrepret this as the sign of agreement, disagreement etc. Such feedback process and intercommunication among audiences is one of main characteristics of live theatre or Roland Barthes mentions this as a sybernetic machine (Aston and Savona, 1991:52).

In daily communication, signal information functions purely and very different from semantic content given to a message. However, on the theatre stage, the physical characteristics are not only used for personal interest, but also give contribution directly to the meaning production (Elam, 1991:41). It means that signal informations in theatre into a source of new meaning information due to the capability of material characteristics of message in connotating a spectrum of meanings, the thing that is called as 'semantization' of material characteristics of sign system or signal on all aesthetics texts (poem, novel, theatre etc.) as if it can create a bridge connecting signal information and semantic information.

In this context, semantic value of information about signal is not similar to information about play, that is as a specific system. It cannot be translated from one type of message into another type of message, because it is derivated from the condition of the message itself in formal and textural compositions (Elam, 1991:42). Extremely, there is a possibility that information is eliminated at all in order to raise a 'free game' from sign systems without stable denotations. For example, a semiotician, Keir Elam, mentions that in the story of *Julius Caesar* there is a neutral question whether Julius Caesar's murder was reported, imitated by the actors, performed in ballet style etc. The process

of this semantization extends beyond the message and channel to make inclusion of 'transmitter' or even the source of communication. The actor's voice and body considered as signal-transmitter have material correlation with the text, because the personal status of the actor, his vocal characteristics and physical specialty –however it is not related to the play itself will influence perception and understanding of the messages by the audiences (Elam, 1991:43). Artificial transmitters can only participate as connotative presences.

If each material (component) of theatre performance considers semantic aspect, so theoretically there is only a little of redundancy in theatre communication. In non-aesthetics communication, creation and understanding of the codes of message which are over ambiguous are useful to reduce noise. The theatre's message is non-redundant until at the level of every signal has or is assumed to have an aesthetics justification and reduction of signals will change drastically the value of messages and text.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the process of communication in a performance is not as simple as imagined so far. In the process of communication, semantic restriction often arises. It is caused by the understanding of the performance's codes and the culture with which the audience are not familiar. In relation with that, if both the sender (performer) and the audience know the codes, it is not necessary to have similar codes or the sender and the receiver do not need to translate the message accurately.

Theoretically, the information value of a performance is absolute and it demands continuous attention and awareness from the audiences, because every signal has its own textual quality. However, in practice, the audience decide whether the information received—such as information of play, information of signal and vice versa—deserves to get the attention. It is possible that the audience will throw away the whole text which is over, because it is non-informative.

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