



## Semiotics and Contemporary Play Directing: The Example of Ogonna Agu's *Dawn in the Academy*

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Received 3 August 2020; accepted 1 September 2020

Published online 26 September 2020

### Abstract

The success of any theatrical performance depends largely on how the theatre director understands, experiments and explores the wide array of techniques and approaches for creating such theatrical production. This inquiry experimented on the semiotic theory, a 21st century postmodern experimental form, as an approach to creating a theatrical production. The play script *Dawn in the Academy* was semiotically analyzed and presented from a directorial perspective on the stage of Chinua Achebe Arts Theatre, University of Calabar, Nigeria. The inquiry emphasizes that the semiotic sign system is an indispensable tool in the dialectic interchange between the stage and the audience. The research, supported by the play project establishes that the semiotic discipline is a productive method a director could apply when faced with an interdisciplinary play script. The semiotic oriented approach of directing on the basis of this research, is therefore established as the vehicle, which the ambiguities, indissoluble structure and juxtaposed variegated happenings inherent in scripts can be transformed. Consequently some of the basic elements of the semiotic theory as highlighted in this paper, reveal the rich and vibrant content of the various facets of the semiotic production process. Contemporary play directors in their professional quest to fully interpret and project the works of playwrights to the audience, have, among others, the option of applying the semiotic theory and sign systems in their stage experimentation.

**Key words:** Semiotics; Sign System; Mise-en-scene; Transformability

Effiom, A. F. (2020). Semiotics and Contemporary Play Directing: The Example of Ogonna Agu's *Dawn in the Academy*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 16(3), 57-62. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/cc/article/view/11746>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11746>

### INTRODUCTION

A study of the major styles, concepts and approaches in theatre reveal a preponderance of techniques and diverse method of theatrical presentation. More so, with the preoccupation of the modern theatre practitioner, whose essence consists in varied experimentations carried out either by projecting old concepts, question certain phenomena or tenets of existing movements. This development had no doubt, characterized contemporary theatre and set its dynamism along a transient path. This fleeting nature of the theatre which Edwin Wilson calls "Kaleidoscopic adventure" (3) results in it's phenomenal growth with attendant complication, contradictions and inconsistency and challenges. In the same vein, theatre directors and practitioners have continued to evolve and experiment on new forms as a way of solving these peculiar problems. One of such experimental form is semiotics.

How best can a stage director convey meaning to an audience with complete clarity? How does he approach an interdisciplinary / postmodern play script especially those written in the disjunctive, displaced, playful and indeterminate fragmented forms. This paper focuses on the workability; suitability and practical application of the semiotic sign system in translating a latent play script into a meaning producing performance. It explicates how the contemporary play director who is faced with non-traditional / non-realistic scripts which are non-linear, non-discursive, and non-closure oriented can manipulate the sign systems during the mise-en-scene to achieve simplicity, consistency and conciseness in a performance.

Through Keir Elam's five taxonomy of performance sign and Jon Whitmore's model of Diachronic Analysis of theatre sign system and against the backdrop of Ogonna Agu's *Dawn in the Academy*, the paper analyzes and show how the juxtaposed variegated episodes, indissoluble structure and ambiguities that characterized the play were decongested, deconstructed and transformed.

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## THE SEMIOTIC ENTERPRISE

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Introduced in philosophy at the end of the 17th century by John Locke, the semiotic discipline did not blossom until the end of the modern period. Describing its growth as rapid, Keir Elam asserts that, of all recent developments in what used to be confidently called humanities, no event has registered a more radical and widespread impact than the growth of semiotics. 21st Century theoreticians in their search for a 'reliable theatre' have continued to expand the frontiers of semiotics as a discipline, projecting its relevance and application to solving perceived problems especially within the field of Theatre and Communication Studies. It is on this score that this semiotic experimentation was carried out as a way of solving the problems inherent in staging scripts fashioned in the post modern continuum.

Semiotics has generally been defined and described as a scientific study of signs, and sign being an indispensable element of communication is an integral and continuous part of semiotics. The notion of sign dates back to man who has always questioned certain phenomena about signs and the laws that govern them. This conscious and continuous analytical inquiry dates back to the classical period as can be seen in the works of Plato, Socrates, the medieval scholastics, the 17th century mentalists and empiricists. This obviously set the base for the crystallization in the 20th century of a renewed interest in the principle of sign systems.

Patrice Pavis aptly demarcates the scope of semiotics within the Theatre and Drama sphere as;

A method of analyzing text and or performance that focuses on the formal organization of the text or the show as a whole, on the internal organization of those signifying systems that make up both text and performance, on the dynamics of the processes of meaning and establishment of sense through the participation of theatre practitioners and audience (Xiv).

The value of semiotics in the precinct of theatre and drama consist in the manipulation of the complex sign system that exist between the playwright, director, actor, designers and the receptive task of the spectator. Each of these constituents of the theatre constitutes signs in themselves; they become, in Bogatyrev's formulation "a sign of a sign". The theatre therefore, presents a platform for interplay of signs. Jinrich Honzl explains that; everything that makes up reality on the stage - the playwright's text, the actors acting, the stage lighting -

all these things in every case stand for other things (74), dramatic performance he concludes is a set of signs. The theatre as seen by Bogatyrev is a medium that transforms everything into a semiotic structure, where objects become for the spectator a sign of a sign or sign for a real object. Every aspect of the theatrical scene presents clusters of signs signifying one thing or the other. This multifarious dimension of a theatrical enactment makes the theatre a veritable arena for interplay of signs, which can, according to Bogatyrev serve as "a particularly rewarding area of semiotic investigation" (42).

At the base of this dynamics of theatre signs / semiotic analysis is the Theatre's TRANSFORMABILITY and MUTABILITY. This aspect of the theatre is specifically viewed by Bogatyrev as one of the most important and fundamental feature of the theatre sign system. He points out that "the actor changes his appearance, dress, voice and even the features of his personality into the appearance of the character whom he represents in the play" (33). On stage things that play the part of theatrical signs can in the course of the play acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life. Expressing his views on the transformability of signs and signifiers in the theatre, Whitmore posits that signified and signifiers are, highly transformable ... because of the given circumstances, the same object may stand for different signified at different moments in the performance. A plain chair may become a King's throne in one scene and a toilet in the next. (21)

Jerzy Grotowski in his bid to strip the theatre bare of every stage decor based his theatre aesthetics in the transformability of objects and actors during the mise-en-scene. The transformability of the accouterments of the theatre is viewed as a major and significant principle of the semiotic enterprise. The experiment that gave vent to this paper utilized this very important principle.

### The Play - *Dawn in the Academy*

The play written in the postmodern continuum is an archetype of the various dissensions that bedevil Nigerian Universities. Through symbolic characters, the play with the thematic concept of oppression dramatizes the success of the collective struggle of the Academic Staff Union against the dictatorial and draconian rule of the head of the Institution. The open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, indeterminate plot clearly reflect the multi-dimensional style employed by the playwright. The emblematic setting of the play, a Nigerian University campus, sets the atmosphere and environment for the dramatic action built around twelve major characters.

Action begins with the commissioning of the **Academy** by the head (king) of the Community in which the Academy is situated. The head of the institution (the Dragon) goes round the school on inspection; takes his

first swipe at the students who complain of inadequate facilities, and debased environment. Action progresses to the staff club where the Dragon stumbles on the Academic Staff Union (ASU) electioneering campaign. However, the Dragon dies before the election, another Dragon who blows tough and is more dictatorial and draconian is sworn in. Aguma, a strong contender for ASU Chairmanship position severally, express doubts and fears about the election being 'doctored' by the new Dragon who was already having' a face off with the union.

The 2nd Dragon's highhandedness and insensitivity heightened the series of conflicts, actions and counter actions in the play; the unions embarked on strike, students riot, Aguma (the eventual winner of ASU election) is arrested. The Academic Union officers, who at this point had formed a formidable force against The Dragon, devised various strategies to compel the Dragon to give in to their demands to no avail.

Then Kolo, an ASU member who is also a theatre artist comes up with the idea of using the theatre strategy on the adamant Dragon. Their first attempt at this strategy, which saw them as beggars failed. That did not deter them, especially Kolo who was creative and full of ideas. He spurred his colleagues on with the following words;

Kolo: (pulling his mask) well played gentlemen, I told you he will not listen. In any case we played it like beggars. Next time we shall play it like madmen. (26)

Playing it like madmen climaxed the series of conflicts that rocked the world of the play. The Dragon is hypnotized into joining a dance performance, which was designed as part of the convocation of which The Dragon was the guest of Honor. Led by Kolo, five minutes into the show the masked players in this "play in a play" switched and played like madmen. This caught the attention of the special guest (The Dragon) who exclaimed;

Dragon: Who's this man shouting like a madman, who is he to disrupt the convocation play? (49).

This interruption by The Dragon triggered hyperbolic lines from the anecdote that was played out by the actors, catalyzing in the grand design of arresting and caging The Dragon through the 'hypnotic dance'. Oblivious of the motive, and carried away by the 'spirit' of the dance, The Dragon danced and exchanged himself with Aguma the ASU President whom he had arrested and caged at the convocation ground with the intent of humiliating him. The Dragon is caught at his game, the captor suddenly becomes the captive and even his officers and security men were not left out of this paradox.

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## **SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE MISE-EN-SCENE AND PRESENTATION**

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The director in a semiotic environment is faced with preponderance interplay of signs and signifiers emitted by

every action of the mise-en-scene. He has the precipitous duty to monitor and arrange the deployment of these signifiers with a view to shape the performance for effective communication with and to the audience. The process of orchestrating and manipulating these signs and their signifiers could be myriad and complex, Elam in his search for a solution in this regard, establishes a taxonomy of performance signs whereby most of the cluster signs inherent in a performance such as language/dialogue vocal pitch, articulation, tempo, space, scenic design, lights, movements, gestures, dance, songs, music, and costume are fused into five broader systems namely: Linguistic/paralinguistic signs system, Visual sign system, Kinesics sign system Vestimentary sign system and Aural sign system.

The different sign systems deployed and orchestrated during the directing process of the play as analyzed below were carried out in accordance with Keir Elam's broad classification of five performance signs. However, to bring clarity and consistency to the process, the five sign systems were diachronically analyzed and applied during the mise-en-scene to reveal patterns of emphasis (foregrounding) and de-emphasis (backgrounding) of the sign systems in other to direct the audiences attention to a particular signifier which the director wants to bring to focus at each part of the play.

### **Linguistics/Paralinguistic Sign System**

Language and dialogue as major signifiers in the linguistic sign system emit cluster of signs at every step in the play. As a way of prioritizing and ordering these signifiers, a fundamental principle of semiotics which consists in editing and overhauling was carried out on the play script; songs, dances, improvisations, visual aids and movements were infused into the script as a check on the high dialogue density that characterized it. Irrelevant, unnecessary or such dialogue that do not advance the plot or found to distort the playwrights' message(s) were cut off. Improvised situations were introduced to develop and fill the gaps experienced during the process of analyzing the script. In order to give the audience a lead to the flashback scene, an improvised 'Given Circumstance' was infused before the main situation in the script. Improvisational situations were introduced in this scene as well as other scenes to aid comprehension. This created excitement and brought to the fore one of the semiotic performance paradigm, which is 'a play in a play'.

### **Visual Sign System**

The visual sign system is one of the deemphasized sign systems in the performance under review. The play as presented had only one item of scenery, that is, the backdrop, which had the 'Academic' insignia, painted on it. As a sign, the backdrop created the academic atmosphere or environment that the play was set, it gave impetus to and highlighted other emphasized signifiers.

This only item of scenery created and utilized the Charles Peirce's notion of iconic sign system with indicia function (earlier referred).

To further background this signifier, the designer, who after a series of discussions with the director submerged the insignia in a deep blue backcloth. Functionally, this iconic scenic signifier created levels in the play and served as a transitional item in the production. It is worthy to note that the insignia backdrop was not lowered at the beginning of the performance, but towards the end of the hemlock, (about three minutes into the play). The indexical 'line' by the narrator in hemlock heralded its lowering.

Sequel to the choice of de-emphasizing the signifiers in the visual sign system in this experiment, light was deployed in the performance just for general illumination.

Nonetheless, we had two instances in the performance where light was used to highlight the action; the Hemlock (the opening scene). A follow spotlight was utilized to spot the actions in the Hemlock. The other instance was in the very last scene where mood lighting was deployed, precisely during the hypnotic dance of the Dragon. The light was dimmed in sync with the faint drumbeat that synchronized the actors' movement. Light as manipulated here connotes fear, submissiveness, and sleepiness. This aided the iconic character (the Dragon) esoterically sleepwalk himself into the cage. For each changing moment of the play, the realistic monotone one-level lighting pattern as deployed performed a primary function of directing the audience's focus to foregrounded signifiers and sign systems.

### **Kinesics Sign System**

The kinesics components deployed in the performance include, movement, gestures, facial expression, posture, picturization, emphasis, dance and mask. These constitute the signifiers in the kinesics sign system signified through the actions and activities of performers on stage. The kinesics sign system which was one of the prioritized sign systems in this performance is seen by Nadotti as a "highly complex component of the performance, they act as signifiers for spectators, about characters' personalities, motivations, emotional states and play scripts' dramatic action" (127).

For the purpose of this performance analysis, all the signifiers in the kinesics signs system are taken as an ensemble since each one of them is seen along the same grid and are incapable of standing alone, their orchestration and manipulation are in relation to, and in the context of the performers act. Patterning and orchestrating the signifiers for this experiment began from the opening glee". One of the various semiotic principles OSTENSION, which, 'show' objects rather than describe them was applied here. The Narrator's sedentary lines were physicalized, shown and expressed through choreographed dance movements, picturization, songs

and visual aid. Instead of using the physical signboard as the signifier to denote the signified THE ACADEMY or school environment, the performers were used as the sign-vehicle for the signifier THE ACADEMY signboard.

Ten 'students' bore the different letters of the alphabet that make up the words THE ACADEMY written boldly and pinned on each chest - an alphabet per person. Through choreographed dance movement they constructed the phrase, THE DAY CAME, CAT MADE HEY: At the third regrouping the performers now constructed the phrase, THE ACADEMY. At that instance the backdrop painted with the 'Academic' insignia was lowered. These two sets of signifiers (THE ACADEMY visual aid and the ICONIC backdrop) elicited the signified (the mental image of a higher institution) denoting the environment of the play.

The semiotic principle of transformability and mutability of signs and signifiers catalyzed the metaphoric substitution and deconstruction of actors from their utilitarian function to symbolic and signifying roles as objects on stage. Set and prop items, which include chairs, standing fan, television, table and sculptural pieces were depicted by actors. Giving credence this suppression of functional roles in the theatre, Honzl submits, "we have freed the concept of "stage" from its constructional restrictions, and we can free the concept of "actor" from the restriction which claims that an actor is one who represents and can only represent a dramatic character in a play" (75).

### **Vestimentary Sign System**

The core of the vestimentary sign system, which was one of the deemphasized signs in this performance, is costume. It is said to be a unique signifier of special complexity; Whitmore denotes this sign system as a three-dimensional piece of art always read in and through an environmental context of space, setting, lighting and proximity each of which can fundamentally change the spectator's reading by presenting competing volume, mass, color, rhythm, distance and the like. (141). This competing dominating quality of this sign system gave impetus to the deployment of the MONOTONE or MONODESIGN costume style for the performance.

### **Aural Sign System**

It is a truism that a performance is as much a visual as well as an aural art; the audience in a theatrical performance hears cacophony of overlapping sounds. Some are consciously manipulated and, others occur as a result of performers inactions, equipment or incidentals. Though complex, the aural sign system was prioritized and treated as one of the emphasized sign system, the component sounds were exploited at different levels in the performance to communicate messages, meaning and affect emotions. Designated songs, music and sound

effects were deployed in this experiment both as signifiers and signified. As a way of shifting audiences' perception, some of the music and songs were manipulated as indicators or counterpoint to other signifiers.

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## SUMMARY

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Intrinsically a play script contains boundless array of signs and signifiers, which in turn produce multifaceted mental image, or meaning for each spectator. The implication of this is the bombardment of the audiences' sensibilities, resulting in a superfluous and meaningless performance. This paper therefore submit that the theatre director can exploit the choices offered by the semiotic theory and approach to directing which consists in structuring, orchestrating and the manipulation of the sign systems, is a tool through which the boundless array of signs and signifiers in a script and performance can be controlled. This is with a view to bring simplicity, conciseness and consistency to a bewildered inter-disciplinary play script as well as decongest and transform the ambiguities and indissoluble structure of the performance to communicate meaningfully and effectively with the audience. Pavis asserts therefore that, "using the tools of semioticians, directors can understand how performances communicate, meanings by examining the signifiers that are decoded by individual spectators (30).

One of such tools or methodologies is the diachronic analysis of sign systems. This semiotic tool no doubt aid directors in the selection and co-ordination of the various sign systems and signifiers manipulated at each emerging moment of a performance. The objective of this semiotic application, as deduced from the experiment under review, is to direct the audience' attention to where the director wants to bring to focus.

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## CONCLUSION / RECOMMENDATIONS

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It goes without saying that the success of a theatrical performance depends on the appropriateness of the channel through which its activities are garnered. A production may fail to achieve it's objective(s) not because the actors do not play their role effectively, or for reasons of insufficient funds, the failure could be due to a thorough understanding of the kind of play and finding the 'right key' to open it's door. Tostonogov capitulate thus; "every play has a lock, and each director fits his own key to it. Finding the key is a task requiring great skill and filigrain precision... which will make the door fly open of its own accord revealing the authors treasure chamber. (60) There is no gainsaying the fact that identifying and utilizing the right and appropriate approach to interpreting a playwright's idea leads to a rewarding exercise.

Providing a roadmap for concerns raised, this paper, through the experiment submits that the semiotic approach is an appropriate technique in embodying the eclectic, disjointed, non-linear and non-closure structure and contents of scripts fashioned in the postmodern continuum. Furthermore, the director through the manipulation of the semiotic sign systems can, among other constructs, decongest and free play scripts from superfluity and complexities; in the same vein achieve simplicity, consistency and conciseness in her work.

Working in a semiotic environment, which is a radical departure from traditional approaches undoubtedly increases the director's impulse for creativity and experimentation. It, nonetheless present a deeper significant experience, excitement and service to actors and audience leading to an enriched communication in performance as well as advance and move the theatre in a new and more exciting direction. However, it is necessary to emphasize that semiotics in its totality is more complex than few explanations made in this paper. Moreover, the concern of this research was not to develop a complete understanding of semiotics, but to examine and test those aspects of semiotic theory that have practical and functional application for contemporary stage directors in the performance of their complex task of creating a theatrical work in a postmodern theatre world. It is on this score that this paper makes the following recommendations.

For enhanced performance and effective communication with the audience, contemporary play directors should explore the rich vibrant content of the semiotic theory in the analysis and performance of play scripts written in the postmodern continuum. Play directors should realign their perception of staging to suit the prevailing concept/style of the 'time' bearing in mind that every play script carries with it a period of which it was written.

Play directors should abhor routine in their performance styles; they should carry out more experiments and venture into new grounds, find focal expressions and sustain same, in the course of their professional practice. Further research should be carried out within the theatre semiotic frame in other to create more awareness of this new paradigm and bring to the fore the richness offered by this contra-distinctive approach. Finally, the process of studying and application of the semiotic theory and principles in the creation of a theatrical work can be enormous and challenging. The experience results in performances that involve a complex modification of conventional factors resulting in innovation that appears less rule-bound. This establishes new norms, new ideas and layers the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge for the ultimate benefit of the audience.

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