Semiotics and a Semiotic Analysis of 'Throes of Leadership': A Study of Julia Okoh's Written Work and Sunday Edum's Directorial Vision

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Abstract

This study delves into the semiotic analysis of the play "Throes of Leadership," exploring Julia Okoh's written narrative and Sunday Edum's directorial interpretation. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, is employed to decode the complex layers of meaning within this dramatic work. The play, set against a backdrop of political and social unrest, provides a fertile ground for examining the semiotic processes at play. Okoh's narrative constructs a rich tapestry of symbols, metaphors, and allegories that depict the struggle for power and leadership. Through a close reading of the text, this study identifies key signs and their connotative meanings, revealing the underlying themes of authority, responsibility, and moral conflict. Sunday Edum's directorial vision further amplifies these semiotic elements, translating Okoh's written symbols into visual and performative signs on stage. By analyzing Edum's use of stagecraft, including set design, lighting, costume, and actor movements, this study uncovers how these elements contribute to the overall semiotic narrative of the play. The intersection of Okoh's literary

semiotics and Edum's directorial semiotics offers a comprehensive understanding of "Throes of Leadership" as a multifaceted signifying system. This analysis not only highlights the intricate relationship between text and performance but also underscores the importance of semiotics in interpreting dramatic works. By examining the semiotic dimensions of both the written and performed versions of "Throes of Leadership," this study provides a deeper insight into the complex dynamics of leadership and power in contemporary society.

Introduction

It has been comparatively argued by scholars namely Ray L. Birdwhistell and Albert Mehrabian, that nonverbal communication modes take preponderance in the communication of meaning over verbal communication modes. To this end, nonverbal communication is an aspect of communication that largely appeals to the cognitive and emotive functions of the human body in the interpretation, comprehension, and judgement of meanings and messages being portrayed in communication, and therefore provokes attention to its applications and implications. Signs and symbols are a component of nonverbal communication whose study is termed semiotics. Thus, semiotics expounds the study of sign and symbols as used in the communication of ideas and meanings. The signs and symbols exist in two levels: the first level is the denotative level which is what is explicitly seen and the surface and literal meaning of that which is explicitly seen. The second level is the connotative level or layer which is the implication of meaning that has stemmed from the denotative level. In theatre, the play producti2on can be taken as the first level –the denotative level– while the message it poses becomes the second level, the connotative level of semiotics. On the premise, the production of *Throes of Leadership* presents signs and symbols that signify in-depth message of the play. Analysing this proposition about how the play signifies meaning is what this study is poised on.

Discourses on semiotics

Scholars have varyingly attempted the definition of semiotics. Mark Fortier (2000) takes an analogical position in his definition of the concept as he explicates that, "semiotics or semiology is the study of signs; words, images, behaviour, human

arrangements of many kinds with which a meaning is relayed by a corresponding outward manifestation. The falling of leaves in autumn, for instance are a sign of the coming of winter" (pg. 17). Deducible from this is that the meanings of signs and symbols are relative to time and space.

In his premise, Elam defines semiotics as the science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in the society. As such, it is equally concerned with the process of signification with those of communication i.e. the means whereby meaning are both generated and exchanged. Its objects are thus at once the different sign-systems and codes at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced thereby. He further posits that:

> The breadth of the enterprise is such that it cannot be considered simply as a 'discipline', while it is too multifaceted and heterogeneous to be reduced to a 'method'. It is—ideally, at least—a multidisciplinary science whose precise methodological characteristics will necessarily vary from field to field but which is united by a common global concern, the better understanding of our own meaning-bearing behaviour. (Elam, 2005, p. 1)

The thought-lines of Elam and Fortier flow in a stream of agreement that semiotics is the science of meaning of signs, symbols, and actions, denoted in more concrete term than abstract symbolism. Elam's definition also brings to bear the multifaceted and disciplinary element of semiotics which brings some form of confusion into the study of science, as different disciplines interpret these signs and symbols as it relates to their practice. The idea that semiotics is a science does not appeal to Elam. To him, semiotics is better explained philosophically than scientifically as he infers that the position of the ideas that "semioticians" bring to the fore are more on the philosophical plane than scientific as empirical study cannot be carried out on the ideas with an absolute outcome. He further observes that the concept of sign –or every other concept a general semiotics decides to posit as its own theoretical object– is nothing but the result of a supposition of this sort. Signs are not empirical objects. Empirical objects become signs (or they are looked

at as signs) only from the point of view of a philosophical decision. Umberto reiterates the preceding argument as he asserts that:

> When semiotics posits such concepts as 'sign ', it does not act like a science; it acts like philosophy when it posits such abstractions as subject, good and evil, truth or revolution. Now, a philosophy is not a science, because its assertions cannot be empirically tested, and this impossibility is due to the fact that philosophical concepts are not 'emic' definitions of previously recognizable 'etic' data that display even minimal resemblance in shape or function. Philosophical entities exist only insofar as they have been philosophically posited. Outside their philosophical framework, the empirical data that a philosophy organizes loses it every possible unity and cohesion. (Umberto, 1987, p.22)

To appreciate the semiotics we would digress and go back to a sojourn of how semiotics was conceived as an idea, concept, philosophy or science of the study of signs and symbols and the different authorities that have come up with different aspects to aid the understanding of the concept. The work of Mark Fortier would serve as a guide to this aspect of this paper. The concept of semiotics has existed in and can be traced to as far back as in the works of Plato and Augustine but semiotics as a self-conscious theory was said to emerge in the twentieth century, in the writings of Charles Sanders Pierce and Ferdinand de Saussure. Semiological work in the twentieth century is observed to have borrowed from the basic tenets from the works of Ferdinand de Saussure titled *Course in General Linguistics* wherein he encapsulates semiology as a new term for semiotics. Saussure argues thus, **"**A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable. It would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology. I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek *semeion* "sign"). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them". (as cited in Danesi, p. 3).

As Fortier reiterates, Saussure defines the sign as having two parts, namely; the signifier which is the material phenomenon we are able to perceive, that is (the sound of a word, the wave of a hand), and the signified, which is the concept

invoked by the signifier. Saussure puts the concept with as much relevance as the signified.

Charles Sanders Pierce takes Saussure's proposition further. In his study, Pierce separates the sign (referred to as the signifier by Saussure), from the object which is loosely what Saussure calls the signified, but a signified which can be in different situations, a concept, a thing, or even another signifier. He works out a classification of signs which sees them not as monolithic (large and unchanging) in randomness of their relationship to the object but as related to the object in different way to the different degrees. A symbol –a word, for example has random relations to its object. An index however –a finger pointing to indicate, direction, for instance has a close strong resemblance to its object: an icon –a photograph of someone or an actor playing a part –has a strong resemblance to the object. Fortier further observes that despite the gradations, Pierce insists in accordance to the stand of Saussure, that a sign stands for something which is not present, thus reinforcing the absence and the metaphysical hollowness that haunt all significations thus the idea of unlimited semiosis is presented, this is regarded as the endless play of meaning and regeneration of signs in time. This interest in interpretation and history differentiates pierce's work from that of Saussure.

Another prominent theorist in semiotic analysis is French theorist, Roland Barthe; his influence is evident in his application of semiotic analysis to specific cultural activities and his application of semiotic analysis to non-verbal as well as verbal signification. Barthe's early works is seen to be structuralist in its semiotic principles, seeking abstract models behind certain areas of cultural production in *Introduction to the structural analysis and Narratives* his imposition a linguistic semiological model on non-verbal activities, for instance, *The Fashion System* written by him is not concerned with clothing itself but with what is said about clothing. Diplomatically, in the Fortier's observation; Barthes begins with the sense "Myth" which is the semiological system whereby ideology is generally imposed on the society.

In relations to the theatre and performance, Fortier puts the work Keir Elams titled *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* on review. He observes that the work is

characteristic of theatre semiotics. In the work Elam is said to display the strong structuralist bent of much semiological analysis, attempting to provide a coherent system capable of accounting for all the significant activity of theatre i.e. smiles, gestures, tones of voice, blockings, music, light, character development and so forth. Quoting eastern European semiotician, Jiri Veltrusky who says "all that is on the stage is a sign" and goes further to elaborate charts to account for the signification in the theatre and for the structures of signification in dramatic discourse; human influence, for instance, can be reduced to the complex system of gestures and tones. Theatre becomes eminently analysable and understandable and eminently readable. The sensual and experimental thickness of theatre becomes for semiotics a density of signs, denser and more complex than sign systems, but a sign nonetheless.

With relevance to the theatre Patrick Paris charts a different direction at the approach to theatrical semiotics of the theatre. He disagrees with a global systemization of theatrical signs which is problematic in the face of those coming up constantly with ideas, concepts and methods of what theatrical performances should be, all done with a an emotional and subjective position. So he proffers a simpler approach, which he says: is to study moments of theatrical signification on the "fly" as it were, in all their localized specificity, without attempting meaning in the theatre as a totality.

Marvin Carlson in a short collection of essays titled ***Theatre Semiotics*** adds three concerns to semiotic theory in the theatre, which he claims have been generally undeveloped. He observes that semiotic contributions of the audience in the meaning of a theatrical performance (in Pierce's terms) how the audience, receives and interprets signs, the semiotics of the entire theatre experience, the appearance of the audience, the displaying in the lobby, the information in the program, the countless other parts as a whole; and the symbolic relationship of the theatre to the life it represents. Carlson's interests opens up semiotic analysis of the theatre onto relations with other theatrical approaches: he concurs with the audience onto reception theory but his concerns is with the total theoretical experience onto materialist analysis; his interest in life onto phenomenology. Hence, for Carlson,

these complications make performance potentially one of the richest and most rewarding areas in the arts for exploring interplay of society and culture.

Fortier attempts a reflection on some issues that bothers on theatrical performances. He observes the essence of the writing of Barthes on theatre, using the work of Bertold Brecht as an example for a semiological theatre. According to Barthe, "For what Brechtian dramaturgy postulates is that today at least, the responsibility of a dramatic art is not so much to express reality as to signify it". (as cited in Fortier, p. 24)

Fortier further explains that although Brecht's theory is not explicitly or directly influenced by semiotics, it is fairly easy to see what Barthes is getting at. Brecht's theatre is primarily concerned with meaning and understanding. Throughout his theoretical work, he stresses this aspect in a number of ways: his theatre is philosophical, scientific, intellectual, and pedagogical. The purpose of theatre is to put the audience in a better position to understand the world around them, a world which, for Brecht and Barthes, is social and changeable. The social world and its meanings, like Saussure's signs, are arbitrary but not unmotivated: they construct hierarchies of power for the benefit of the few and hide from the many their ability to change things (Barthes writes of the 'demystification' of this misrepresentation in Brecht's theatre). A sign, therefore, is a social sign, what Brecht calls a '*gestus*', and Barthes defines as 'the external material expression of the social conflicts to which it bears witness'. Using a scenario as example, he explains thus:

> Imagine, for instance, being stopped for speeding by a member of the police. She/he approaches your car with an emotionless expression of authority and addresses you with a reserved, dominating correctness; you smile innocently, harmlessly and, sounding befuddled, address him/her deferentially as 'Officer': each of these artificial behaviours is a sign indicating the power relations and roles at play. (Barthes…)

In addition, Barthes focuses on costume as one type of social sign. 'The costume is nothing more than the signifier of a relation which must constantly link the work's meaning to its "externality" as such it must be constructed so as to aid in the reading of its social meaning. In this way theatre involves 'a politics of the sign'. Each theatrical *gestus* should aim for clarity of argument, in the case of costume for 'a precise vestimentary code', and the sensuous qualities of a costume, its grain and texture, are in the service of understanding, not sensuality. Wealth, for instance, is not to be signified by piling on random luxury, but by presenting a careful and precise idea of vestimentary privilege. The social *gestus* does not arise from an identity, a phenomenological closeness to being and doing; it is a role, one we agree to or are forced to adopt, and importance is placed in Brecht's theatre on alienation or internal distance from social meaning. Brecht takes his model of acting from social life, from the 'Street Scene' in which someone demonstrates an event - an accident, for instance, or an assault –not by becoming the person or action represented but by demonstrating it objectively from without think of a witness giving testimony at a trial. Theatrical action is explicitly representation rather than presence, and the actor has a double role on stage as both character and actor/demonstrator. Theatre may be, as Pavis asserts, 'the privileged domain of the icon' of signifiers with a close relationship to what they represent, but people and things on stage remain representations and are not identical to what is represented: the stage chair is not the chair represented, although it is a chair; the actor is not the character, although s/he is a human being. For Brecht, as for Barthes, the generation of understanding and meaning is not an ascetic activity. Brecht writes of the 'pleasure of exploration', of a sensuous rationalism rich in humour, which- is the most appropriate and viable pleasure in a scientific age. He writes, "Every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the art of living." But living is a social activity, and its art is not about making the present but about making a different and better world.

> There is a tension in Barthes's reading of Brecht between a structuralist desire for system and a provisional and inductive openness. On the one hand, Barthes writes, Brecht 'offers not only a body of work but also a strong, coherent, stable system'; on the other, 'in Brecht's theatre the Marxist elements always seem to be

> recreated. Basically, Brecht's greatness, and his solitude, is that he keeps inventing Marxism'. Brecht is interested in inductive science, in which answers are discovered in particular situations rather than imposed systematically from the outset. In a later work Barthes argues that Brecht's theatre of discrete scenes means that there is 'no *final* meaning, nothing but projections, each of which possesses a sufficient demonstrative power'. Nonetheless, for Barthes, Brecht's theatre controls and limits signs and meanings and he adds: "The costume is a kind of writing and has the ambiguity of writing, which is an instrument in the service of a purpose which transcends it; but if the writing is either too rich, too beautiful or too ugly, it can no longer be read and fails in its function." (as cited in Fortier, p. 25).

Pierce's stand of each position of each acts of signification as becoming in turn a sign in a new signifying context. In this light, some theorist for example in the work of Carlson, who noted the importance of the audience reception for signification. Paris for example notes the general trend of theatre semiotics, reorienting its objectives in the light of the theory of reception and this take opens up a myriad of questions such as: how is it possible in this situation to , to control mean- making activities in a theatrical audience ? Unlimited semiosis means not only a proliferation of meaning due to the nature of signs themselves, but also the proliferation of meaning among those who receive and generate signs.

Further discussion bothers clarity of signs and symbols in a theatrical performance, this quest to find clarity brings forth questions such as: Is it true, however, that everything on the stage is a sign, controlled or otherwise? Are there aspects of theatrical reality which are in excess of signification? To attempt an answer a performance by William Shakespeare was used to a seek understanding of this aspect of the subject matter. The example goes thus: In 1987 there was a production of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* at the Young Vic in London. For this production the stage was a square constructed of shiny black tiles in the centre of the audience. As people entered, there were stagehands to make sure that they did not walk across the stage to get to their seats, since the shiny stage caught every

dusty shoe print. By the end of the night, however, the actors had transformed that polished pristine space into a smudged grey record of their every movement. Were these shoe prints theatrical signs? If so, what did they mean? One might see in them echoes of the inevitable corruption that haunts Vienna in the play. One might fault the director for allowing such wayward signifying noise to disrupt the clarity of the production. One might ignore them, as one ignores the idiosyncrasies of, for example, any particular stop sign, and its dents and chipped paint. A perhaps inescapable drive of semiotics is to make of something a sign or otherwise exclude it from consideration. In the light of the complicating aspect in regarding signs, symbols and meaning in the theatre, Aloysius Van Kerstern from a highly scientific and rationalist semiotic perspective calls for "disinfecting" the non- analytical dirt. But this call begets the question what if non analytical dirt is part of what there is on the stage or theatre. Semiotics is concept that is far reaching, which has brought into being so many subsets and arguments that makes the concept so complicating and almost incomprehensible.

The play *Throes of Leadership*

The play is authored by a renowned feminist Professor of Theatre Arts and Film Studies, Julia Okoh, staged in the University of Port Harcourt play-production studio known as the CRAB. It served for the command performance in honour of the 80th birthday anniversary of the second Vice Chancellor of the University. The play was directed by Sunday Edum, a lecturer in the Department of Theatre Arts and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt. The performance, the performance viewed for this review is a rehash of the original performance.

Synopsis

The play is about the trials and tribulations faced by an ex-vice chancellor of the University of Port Harcourt, who, as the head of federal institution, is saddled with the smooth management of all the aspects of the institution. Thus, issues such as power supply, portable water supply, welfare of the students and staff are part of the vice chancellor's responsibility. The inadequacies of some infrastructures and welfare needs of the students lead to criticism from members of staff, and the height of the situation was the violent student demonstration and destruction of school properties. As the story progresses with constant antagonism from members of

staff and the editors of the institutions newsletter and the management board (comprising of professors and senior lecturers who gave the vice chancellor little or no support) and an eventual call for his relinquishing his position after a failed business transaction he embarked on to make extra finance for the institution, the VC finds himself in a state of melancholy and self-doubt. In spite of all travails the play ends happily as his action was justified because the money for which he was criticized for was paid and an agricultural venture which he embarked upon yielded positive results.

Thematic analysis

The central subject in the play bothers on the trials faced in the position of leadership in administration. The travails of administrators being abused and criticized and even pressurized by colleagues and subordinates to relinquish power are universal as it can be experienced in various units of administration in the world, in Africa it is very prevalent, and almost every day the news agencies, print and electronic all carry stories of lack of faith in leaders and if possible, plots of their exit from office. In Nigeria, this subject is a constant occurrence in all tiers of the government, as we constantly hear reports of clamour for the removal of one political leader or another from power. Sometimes, ironically, it is the same people who at a point were praise singers of these administrators that would be calling for their exit. The play also opens our eyes to the positive use of public funds through illegal methods because most times what entails in Nigeria is the administrator putting public funds into personal schemes with the aim of personal aggrandizement. Another subject is the "first lady" syndrome, which is observed in situation two, where the wife of the VC constantly interrupt a very serious university board meeting for reasons that should have been personal. Below is a dialogue between the VC and his wife as she interrupts an important board meeting to request the VC's official vehicle for personal use

VC: Madam, we are trying to have an important meeting here.

Mrs VC: VC sir! I didn't go to work today because I have an important appointment to see the Minister of petroleum, …My car is not strong enough for the rugged road to his

> office. This is why I requested a strong car from the university….

Her explanations for constantly intruding on the meeting of the VC is not as important as the matter being discussed officially. This occurrence is a norm in Nigerian administration and it plays out in the society as every politically elected government official, be it a president, governor, or even local government chairmen empower their spouses with almost as much power given to them. The last political administration (His Excellency Goodluck Ebele Jonathan' administration) is a case in point amongst, as the wife of the president was busy going about tactlessly, residing in the F.C.T and working in Bayelsa, going ahead to welcome a diplomatic visitor with a handshake before the President. Knowing constitutionally that there is no office of the "first lady" but unofficially, it is a practice that bedevils the Nigerian political terrain.

Another point of discussion is the subject of freedom of the press, as it is seen that the criticisms noted by the editors of the Newsletter. Not taken in good faith by the VC, he insists the editors were being antagonistic and disrespectful to his person and his administrative authority. Thus should be sanctioned and not be allowed to write unbiased articles. This plays out in situation IV:

> VC: Your Editors have been launching vitriolic attacks against the administration. Imagine them telling the VC to resign. For what?
>
> Editor I: Sir we proposed two options. We wrote the Vice Chancellor should sit up and run the university appropriately or else resign.
>
> VC: Did you hear him? How dare you? Are you trying to infer that I do not know how to run the university?

Marxist aesthetics appears in the play as students protest for a change in the administration. In the relative past, citizens protested commonly violently,

destroying infrastructures in a bid to get the government's attention or ensure their demands are met. However, in recent times peaceful demonstrations have become more common and could be due to the reason that the infrastructures present (though inadequate) are being used by the citizens who make up the protesters, not the administrators, and knowing how long it took them to "magnanimously" put those inadequate infrastructures in place, so destroying them is to their loss and detriment. And another deterrent to this phenomenon is that administrations in recent times have a low tolerance to demonstrations, irrespective of whether they are peaceful or otherwise and this is checked with the deployment of armed military personnel to disperse the protesting crowd. This method is observed is many peaceful protests, worthy to note is the EndSars scenario that played out in 2020 where peaceful protesters were shot at to disperse the crowd and this action led to loss of lives.

Further discussion inherent in the play is the empty promises by politicians vying for administrative positions, who would vehemently criticize the administrations of their predecessors and promise being solutions caused by their predecessors but after being elected into office, turn around and make the same mistakes or even do much worse. This is observed in situation IX in the conversations between lecturers.

> Lecturer I: In August 27, 1985, Babangida came to power as a champion of human rights.
>
> Lecturer II: Yes he claimed that he overthrew his predecessor in the interest of the people. He wanted to rescue them from the excesses of the predecessor and foster a better economic status for the nation.
>
> Lecturer III: Ironically, soon after he enmeshed himself in the same mal-practices for which he persecuted his predecessor thereby breaking his promise to stamp out authoritarianism and corruption from the nation, his record in this area has deteriorated over time.

The play is replete with so many issues bothering on leadership, some of which have been discussed in this thematic analysis.

Semiotic analysis

As earlier stated, semiotics is a study of signs and symbols. The concept is far reaching with a myriad of subsets that keep coming into being as one is discussed, that is, a new subset begets another in a bit to understand the former so for this analysis, an attempt would be made to use just the subsets of semiotics that be used for theatrical performance assessment. According to Keir Elam, semiotics is the study of the production of meaning in the society as it is equally concerned with the process of signification with those of communication. Elam also reiterates Jiri Veltrusky that "all that is on stage is a sign." Marvin Carlson, with his structuralist position puts forward the total experience that is all that is put on display in the theatrical performance viewed by the audience, and how they interpret the experience which ranges from what is seen in the auditorium, problem dealt with in the play, and displays in the lobby. Being a member of the audience, this researcher avers that the play *Throes of Leadership* seeks to bring to the fore the difficulties of leadership in a large enterprise involving a sizeable number of educated people with the knowledge and understanding of their rights. The first word of the title throes, which means pangs, implying the pains or struggles experienced in positions of leadership like the saying goes to whom much is given much is expected. The play signifies the pain (both physical, psychological and emotional) experienced by leaders, and could be perceived to be a cry for help from the endless criticism. And that contrary to what could be deduced by followers, leaders go through lot of problems even with all the much available material comfort, they still through much worse psychological and emotional problems.

Conclusion

Following the dictum of art for life, the play signifies and represents different universal issues that are faced in positions of power, giving the audience food for thought so they go home to ponder on it and assess the problems presented before them. The play production is a sign, symbol, the signifier that signifies the meaning gained as the play's thematic thrust. This is why every play presentation can be

seen as a presentation of semiotics, and thus considered largely relevant in the making of meaning from the idea a play projects to and about the society.

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