

Semiotics: Signs and Meanings in Contemporary Dance in Malaysia

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Semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings, and is best related to the works of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, French historian Michael Foucault and American philosopher Charles Peirce. According to Foucault, semiotics is an ensemble of knowledge and technical skills that enables us to perceive where signs might be, to define what constitutes signs, and to understand the relationship between signs and the laws governing them. For Saussure, semiotics is a science that *investigates the life of signs and demonstrates what signs consist of and what laws govern them* (Counsell and Wolf 2001: 19).

Saussure defines the sign as having two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the phenomenon which can be perceived such as the sound of a word ('hello'), or the wave of a hand. The signified, on the other hand, is the concept invoked by the signifier. The 'hello' and the wave of the hand give us the idea of a greeting. For Saussure, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and is based on cultural agreement rather than on any natural order. To understand semiotics one has to understand how language works. For example, a 'tree' may not necessarily have connection to the idea of a tree. It is a tree because humans established it as a tree. Language works as a system because it is a structured form. The signified is a concept and not a referent in the world. Words do not take their meanings from their relationship to ideas or things but from their relationships with other words and these relationships are relationships of difference. A 'tree' is a tree because it is not a 'three' or a 'thee' (Counsell and Wolf 2001: 19).

Semiological studies of theatre started with the works of American theorists such as Jean Alter, Keir Elam, Erika Fischer-Litche, Patris Pavis and Jiri-Veltrusky. In theatre semiotics, every sound,

action, object, or custom is a sign that leads to the production of meaning. According to Keir Elam, everything that is put up on a stage is a sign. Erika Fischer-Litche seems to agree with this notion and further writes that everything that humans produce is significant for themselves and for one another, because humans live in a signifying world. Theatre semioticians, Elaine Aston and George Savona explain that the usefulness of semiotics lies in the potential to make us more aware of how drama and theatre are made (Counsell and Wolf 2001: 25). The lights, sounds, movements, gestures, blockings, silences, sets and costumes tell us something about the production. They are all signs.

To study semiotics in the field of dance, one has to analyze and connect the signs and their meanings to the dance production. Signs in a dance production appear in the form of choreographic elements such as theme, movement, gesture, facial expression, proxemics (the use of space), costume, props and technical elements like lighting, sound and setting. Dance meaning becomes the product of cultural agreement, the result of a systematic use of various choreographic codes and conventions. Such an approach not only permits one to detect different kinds of meanings in dance, but also how a dance produces meaning.

Dance researchers often use the term 'kinesthetic semiotics' in their study of semiotics as dance is a bodily discourse that engages in human movement. Kinesthetic semiotics, which is the study of signs through bodily movement, has placed dance research and human movement studies on the agenda of cultural studies. By expanding our studies of bodily text to include dance in all its forms – social dancing, theatrical dancing and ritualized movement – we are able to understand how social identities are signaled, formed and negotiated through bodily movement (Desmond 1998: 29). Kinesthetic semiotics enables us to analyze how social identities are codified in performance styles and how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies or exceeds norms of non-dance bodily expressions within specific historical contexts.

Semiotic analysis of dance divides choreographic codes and conventions into two kinds: those that order the dance by giving it an internal coherence and structure, and those that organize the dance with respect to the world that surrounds it. Conventions that give dance its internal order include the vocabulary of movements that make up the dance, and the syntactical principles such

as repetition, theme and variation, or algorithmic and aleatory techniques that govern the selection and combination of these movements. Conventions through which dance makes reference to the world include its frame, style (specific use of space, body parts and movement that give the dance a signature); and modes of representation (indexical, iconic or symbolic) through which the dance summons up its subject matter.

Dance, whether social, theatrical or ritually based, forms one subset of the larger field of movement studies. Each dance exists in a complex network of relationships to other dances. The meaning of non-dance techniques of using the body can be situated both in the context of other socially prescribed and socially meaningful ways of moving, and in the context of the history of dance forms in specific societies (Desmond 1998: 31).

This article discusses the signs and their meanings in contemporary dance in a few selected choreographies by established Malaysian choreographers. For a start, I would like to bring your attention to the work of Aida Redza who deals with issues of identity, gender and feminism. Redza focuses on the dilemma faced by women in a repressive society. Her works often question the subservience of Asian women and Muslim women in particular and their rights as free individuals. Redza's *Berkumandangnya Quasidah* (Echo of a Chant), staged in Kuala Lumpur in 1998 and 2000 and restaged in Berlin in 2002, deals with postcolonial and feminist issues. There are many signs in these choreographies which show that there are tight bonds between tradition, deconstruction and contemporary dance. The works question female identities by dealing with issues of placement, displacement and replacement. While Redza questions female identities using Asian symbols, she refers to the exploitation of women elsewhere such as female models exposed on the bill-boards of big cities like Berlin, New York and Paris, or women and children forced into prostitution (Fernandes 2003).

Berkumandangnya Quasidah projects the unheard cries of a woman and her painful experiences in a male dominated society. Although alone almost all the time on stage, Redza manages to fill the entire performance space with a variety of characters through the deconstruction of her body postures and movements. These characters include a traditional Balinese dancer, a prostitute, a maid

(migrant worker) and a jumping child. How does Redza portray a Balinese dancer or a prostitute working late at night? She uses a pair of fans which signify a Balinese dancer and experiments with traditional Balinese dance movements although in deconstructed forms. She throws a glance at the audience as she flicks her fans, moving gracefully and hypnotizing her viewers. She puts her fans down and suddenly exits. She glides onto the stage again sitting on a mattress. She takes off the Balinese cloth wrapped around her and moves the lower part of her body seductively, and rolls and stretches herself on the mattress, showing parts of her legs so as to impress upon the audience that she is a prostitute. Within a second, she erases the audience's memory of the Balinese dancer and the prostitute by splashing a bucket of water on herself. In this way, she transforms herself into a maid or a domestic helper. She starts cleaning everything around her creating imaginary windows, doors, shelves and the floor. She uses repetitive machine-like movements showing that she has to work for long hours, then slows down and starts cleaning herself first slowly and then rubbing the cloth against her body aggressively as if trying to shed her skin. She suddenly springs up and transforms into a jumping child. What does Redza do to show that she is a child? Signs such as playing with a doll and movements such as jumping up and down like an excited child signify the "child" in her. She dances around the stage in a carefree manner as if nothing is bothering her. Then she stops and starts to move cautiously, looking around all the time giving us the impression that she is being watched, drops her doll and exits in a graceful way.

In an interview, Redza stressed that she wanted to show that a girl is free when she is a child. However, as she grows up, she becomes subordinated by her family, community and her religion. Redza uses her femoral joint and her entire body in a variety of positions to portray the desires, hopes, dreams and frustrations of the characters. Redza's works break tradition into irreversible pieces of female identity, nonetheless coherent and "intergrated" (Fernandes 2003).

Contemporary choreographers in Malaysia today deal with other issues such as crossing cultural borders and hybridity. One particular choreographer that I would like to mention here is Mew Chang Tsing. Mew is a versatile young choreographer who not only deals with cross-culturalism but also makes social statements through her dance. *Nusantara* explores the rich cultural heritage of the Malay Archipelago and hybridity which takes place in the region. The production is a fusion of

cultures, styles and traditions performed by some of the most exciting performing artists in Malaysia. The production highlights the tolerant nature of the Malays who have accepted the arrival of the non-Malays and their cultures. In order to show that acculturation has taken place, Mew fuses Malay dance movements and techniques with those of other ethnic groups. As a result, *Nusantara* becomes an exploration of cultures through dance. *Nusantara's* strength is in its success of bringing across the message of unity and harmony. The movements of the dancers are the signs which help audiences to understand the concept of harmony that forms the key ingredient of the production.

Trained in Hong Kong, Loke Soh Kim is another Malaysian Chinese choreographer who deals with issues of identity, gender, and what it is like to be a Chinese-educated woman living in a Malay and male-dominated world. An example of Loke's work is *Gui Qu Lai Xi* which means the relationship between a woman and her traditions (Aboo Backer 2002: 90). A semiotic analysis of the choreography tells us that this piece is based on the strong Chinese tradition which is instilled in Loke. All the props, costumes and music are influenced by Chinese culture. The use of a mat on the stage signifies the tight bond between the dancer, her traditions and her dance.

The dancer performs slow and graceful movements at the beginning of the dance. She combs her hair (which is also a significant prop in this dance) and bundles it in a coil at the base of her neck. She is drawn to a male dancer who enters as she performs her household chores. They dance together as though embracing each other. As the music becomes louder, Loke turns away from the male dancer but is still drawn to him. In the process, her hair drops down and she finally manages to break free from him. The movements become more aggressive and energetic. Loke takes center stage and expresses her freedom, dreams, fantasies and hope in the final dance. The male dancer is left behind and his presence is no longer important. He is just a passing shadow in the audience's memory.

Loke explores the strict traditions of Chinese culture and tries to find an identity for herself. Ironically, she only finds herself when she actually breaks free from the tradition and only sees it as a symbol of or a path to her Chinese heritage. The act of letting her hair loose is a clear sign of breaking away from tradition. In many Asian societies, a woman's pride is her hair. Straight, long, shiny and black hair is the symbol of womanhood. A woman is supposed to keep her hair tidy and not to let it go wild or destroy it.

Contemporary dance deals with various issues such as gender, cultural identity and religion. Semiotics has enabled us to look at these issues and to further understand how dance movements, stage props, costumes, sets, music and other performance elements are signs that represent ideas or concepts of choreographers.

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