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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i6/4200>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i6/4200

Received: 06 April 2018, Revised: 29 April 2018, Accepted: 25 May 2018

Published Online: 22 June 2018

In-Text Citation: (Abdullah & Saearani, 2018)

To Cite this Article: Abdullah, Z. B. H., & Saearani, M. F. T. B. (2018). The Exploration of Visual Images in Artistic Design of the Play of Kena Main at Istana Budaya. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(6), 220–228.

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Vol. 8, No. 6, June 2018, Pg. 220 - 228

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The Exploration of Visual Images in Artistic Design of the Play of *Kena Main* at Istana Budaya

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Abstract

This research aims to study the exploration of visual images and artistic elements in the stage design of the play of *Kena Main* at Istana Budaya. The combination of visual exploration and art is a very important process in producing a play that contains meaningful script and artistic value. The transformation processes of visual exploration and art involve abstract, realistic, and experimental forms according to the concepts and manuscript themes interpreted and performed on stage. Therefore, this paper shows the role of visual image and art elements intertwined, to form the artistic design of theatrical art performance, by applying the artistic elements and design principles based on the script of Khalid Salleh's play, *Kena Main*. The exploration of the visual image and art elements in *Kena Main* has an aesthetic value, depicting social issues in the community through the performance's portrayal of life struggles of the blind, the homeless, and the drug addicts. The performance of the three groups of people symbolizes the spirit of brotherhood and togetherness in the community. Results from this research will highlight the importance of the exploration of visual image and elements used in *Kena Main* to increase our understanding of the importance of these elements, providing the source of inspiration to artistic designers in the context of design and set placement based on community sociology.

Keywords: Exploration, Visual Image, Artistic Design, Play.

Introduction

Visual interpretation refers to translating the implied elements behind a work and also the underlying meaning, message, or values. Visual interpretation is an important issue in defining the underlying messages through meaning and value in a work. According to (Felman, 1977), every artistic work requires a precise visual interpretation in order to create a critical evaluation. Generally, explanations about the structural forms of the work and the relationship between visual art elements are the result of the merging of author's personality and the goal of the idea,

which becomes a frame concept, presented in his work. The conflict portrayed in the performance could be solved based on the themes and issues that are brought forth by the play *Kena Main*.

In this era of globalization, the arts seem too detached from several generations in the society, especially the visual arts created by artists of old time. According to Knobler (1985), visual arts have existed from pre-historic wall paintings and records of visual arts continuously grow to this day even though influences and developments to the images result in differences from era to era. In addition to that, Woon (1997), has stated that visual art is a type of communication tool, be it in the form of drawings, illustration, pamphlets, posters, or even sculptures, containing a message to be delivered. According to Read (1969), art is a creation of form that triggers happiness, excitement, and aesthetical pleasure.

Dewey (1980) has explained that aesthetical pleasure and the concept of beauty are the result of encounters between a knowledgeable individual and a message or object. As it is known, most of the society simply understands art as drawing, while art actually encompasses a wide array of disciplines such as interior design, landscaping, performance arts, and so on. Specifically, visual art is a creation that can be perceived by sight. The work or creation is sourced from the ultimate mental and artistic capacity of one's mind and subsequently translated into real-world objects that can be seen, such as pictures, sculptures, models and the like.

Theatrical performances that consist of various team efforts in a production organization are examples of special creative works, since they involve artistic and cultural aspects of a community. The works of theatrical art performances are developed as an educational channel for society as well as to create awareness in the audiences on certain effects involving feelings, pleasure, morality, aesthetics and other elements. (Lansing & Kenneth, 1996)

The aesthetic value of a play is a directed, arranged and assessed visual effect through an artistic observation process. This visual image brings viewers to understand the purpose of the script done by the scriptwriter. The involvement of formal education in the fields of fine arts or even theatrical performances has made the creation process of creative works difficult, especially the designing process. In this process, various forms of expertise such as thinking skills, technical skills, organizational skills, and communication skills are the general prerequisites.

This article describes the play of *Kena Main* as a performance that emphasizes issues in the society, portrayed indirectly by a group of blind musicians as the actors. The theme of the issue highlights the questions and underlying meanings of 'true and false', 'right and wrong', 'sins and good deeds', 'the legal and forbidden', and 'the heaven and hell'. Meanwhile, the borderline between 'black and white', loosely interpreted to 'distinguishing right from wrong', is the one mentioned by Khalid Salleh himself. The study therefore aims to investigate the script of *Kena Main*, to further understand the social issues portrayed, represented by several groups of people who seek for 'schadenfreudist' opportunities and chances from weaknesses or problems that arise within the community or among friends (Salleh, 2015). This visual image brings the viewer to the point of the script intended by the scriptwriter. To create the best performance, the

forming of creative works including artistry in the design process, implementing thinking skills, technical skills, organizational skills and communication skills, are applied based on the formal education.

The Exploration of Visual Images and Art Elements in the Artistic Design of *Kena Main*

The design process of visual art in a product basically undergoes same methods. These methods change, however, based on the different types of products. In the production of performing arts, specifically theatrical sets, lack of knowledge, experience and ideas in the design process will lead to negative results in the final product. In this stage, designers should understand the meaning of artistry and visual art in the process of stage set design, while at the same time, designers should be familiar with the principles of design and technical skills to produce designs needed in a stage production. The processes of set design through various stages like cognitive, psychomotor and effective results will give an overall balance to ensure that the final product design fulfils the demands and requirements of a stage performance production with good quality, in terms of artistry and visual art. The main processes of theatrical art design include strategies like information, research about the performance's concepts, formation and brainstorming of the idea from the aspect of aesthetics and design, exploration of the performance materials, the creation of stage set, and evaluation from the audiences.

Interpretation in the exploration of visual art involves the understanding of the underlying meaning, message, or values in a particular work. Each interpretation can reveal every single detail of the process, with precise words used. According to Thorne (1999), every work of art requires a precise visual interpretation in order to make a critical assessment. Generally, explanations of a work's structure and the relationship between every artistic element are combined from the artist's personality and his conceptual ideas of the work. The problems brought forth by the artist, as well as how far these problems could be solved based on the themes explored, are the factors used to create the script of the play *Kena Main*.

Herbert Read, an English philosopher and author of 'The Meaning of Art', has summarized the definition of beauty and aesthetics as the unity of formal relations among our senses and perceptions. The basic features of beauty are arranged in various forms of alignments and collisions in terms of lines, colours, forms, tones, and words (Dharsono, 2003). While the appearance of the work of art is capable of questioning the audience, this charm will reinforce the aesthetic attitude concerning the centralization of a charming conscience. What is faced and observed by a person, can be formed into an object of aesthetic.

According to McKim (1980), many traditional thinkers consider visual thinking as a symbolic activity that is different from merely observing. According to this view, observing is choosing or collecting information, representing mental activity of the highest order. When one sees an object, for example a work of graphic design, he or she will understand to comprehend it visually and verbally. In question, how does the process of verbal meaning happen? McKim (1980) has stated that the form of meaning could not escape from human attention as a factor of visual unity, followed by the interpretation, which is the meaning of the verbal representation that is basically constant, from the author's experience.

The discovery of certain formulas in creating designs, that are considered good and beautiful based on the main principles in this field, are constantly based on universal matters, and applicable into various disciplines in a plethora of ways. The legacy of design knowledge that has been accepted all this while come from the forms of art and design such as knowledge of lithography, typography, illustrations, and industrial design that have evolved for centuries (Sukada, 2002). This means that large amounts of basic ideas on designs have emerged as a concept of universal value that contribute to the learning of artistic designs of the play *Kena Main*.

Guidelines of design can be categorized into six principles, namely (1) balance, (2) proportion, (3) rhythm, (4) emphasis, (5) unity, and (6) several concepts related to perceptive psychology. According to Wallschlaeger (1991), the interpretation of a composition's visual quality is extremely relative, meaning that it varies in terms of backgrounds and the moulds used by artists and designers to interpret the aspects of visual art and the meaning in the set design of the theatrical performance. The quality of aesthetics can be defined as a principle of comprehensive harmonic design or exposing a designer's feelings towards his or her work. The unity mentioned in the design principles can arise from the character design on the stage such as (1) balance, (2) contrast, (3) harmony, (4) emphasis, (5) proportion, (6) simplicity, (7) scale, (8) rhythm, and (9) variation. Image 1 shown below, explains the use of the principles in the stage set design.



From the image, the relationship between the object, image and the backdrop also influences the composition of the stage set design. The unity of the design can be achieved by creating a new connection towards the stage set's backdrop. For example, the human figure, represented by the white element on a black backdrop (which represents a building set of the Kuala Lumpur metropolis) will appear larger, compared to the object or image of actors on a white backdrop. This is therefore applied in the following Image 2.



Leading to the next point, Image 3 below shows a scene in *Kena Main*, where the visual art elements of texture, colour, space, and physical elements such as dimension, shape, and proportion are applied. If the design successfully enables human perception and feelings to be portrayed well, it means that the meaningful connections between visual forms in the design process are great. Visual elements are constantly changing in tones, textures, poles, or patterns as well as colours, affected by light intensity focus of view, whether near (close-up view) or far. The nature of visual art elements in *Kena Main* helps designers in identifying design objects in terms of interior and exterior structures.



The elements in visual art are important to designers in observing the world and man-made objects composed of various different surface characteristics. According to Kim (1980), the process of understanding visual forms is not only verbally, but also visually; this is also the case if we were to talk about the meaning of form in art and design. The "meaning", too, is not something one expresses in the form of words, but also what one wishes to disclose through appearance, for example, how one presents oneself visually in character and the role being played.

A big part of research on visual thinking has grown from the research on creativity, in the psychology field. With awareness, all minds have a role in receiving, storing and processing information. This is one way to understand the concept and focus of studying the transfer of creativity from the mind to the senses, and in-between (Enstice & Peters, 1996). Visual thinking is a form of thinking that uses the results from observing, seeing, imagining, and drawing. In the context of visual art and design, it gives a focus to the third outcome from the picture, drawing, or sketch. Only when the thinking is capable to be expressed through a sketched form, can it be said that it has been represented by a graphic element, and later, the picture design based on visual thinking is created (Bay, 1974).

Conclusion

Several academic reviews can be seen using some related theories, in order to analyze the studies conducted. The debate on the exploration of visual images usually uses semiotic or aesthetic theory to analyze the elements or the meanings from visual images. From a cultural aspect, symbols play an important role in observing a series of meanings on humanity. (Rohidi, 2000). Life and universe forms such as galaxies, stars, and others show representative symbols with various different expressions. Referring to this study, researchers use visual images to analyze the play of *Kena Main* at Istana Budaya. The *Kena Main* theatrical performance also delivers the message of humanity with various expressions, and this matter also affects the artistic design created. Various metaphors and images are implemented to become the backdrops like buildings and village houses in the play, but it is crucial to understand the interpretation and expression of meaning intended by the stage set designer. From an analytical aspect in this study, the researcher uses the theory by Pierce. According to Zoest (1978), by referring to Pierce's opinion, there are three categories, by focusing on three stages, namely Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Based on the three stages, the signs can be analyzed by referring to (1) Qualisign, (2) Sinsign, and (3) Legisigns. Qualisign refers to the signs of a characteristic, Sinsign refers to the signs of a shape or appearance, and Legisigns refers to language. These three signs can be used to analyze *Kena Main's* visual images based on the meaning of the presented symbols.

The design process in an art product basically goes through the same stages and methods. The stages too can change to different methods based on the type of the art product. In performing arts' productions, theatre set designs, for example, go through various approaches. In the design process, lack of knowledge, experience and ideas will negatively affect the creation. In this stage, a designer must know the meaning of artistry in the stage set's design process, while at the same time the designer should be familiar with the principles of design and technical skills in order to create the designs required for a stage production.

In creation processes of the artistic design for *Kena Main's* stage, visual balance between the thought medium and the intended emotions to be conveyed by the creator is an important factor to be portrayed on the stage. Important visual image perspectives are lines, colour, texture, space, and symbols based on the elements. Psychologically, lines can feature the musical melody of the story, while certain colours and tones can convey the rhythm. The role of the set designer is important in analyzing the interpretation of visual aspects by means of scripts, which later will

be visually performed on stage. Therefore, the visual art images will give a huge impact on a play, exemplified by *Kena Main*.

Apart from that, agreement between the artistic creator and the director is also important to determine the direction of visual and aesthetic characteristics of a play to meet the director's intentions. This is to guarantee that all elements designed, created, and built meet the director's planning and intentions, as well as to ensure a smooth flow of the movements in the stage performance. For theatre's set design, one should understand the elements of art and design principles. With the understanding, designers will be able to suggest shape of the staging, and later to create the design and build the set that coincides with the director's aims and intentions in a theatrical performance.

According to Baugh (2005), understanding a script requires the ability to properly communicate. Here, communication does not only mean dialogue speech, but also the delivery of the visual image. A scenographer has also created photographic aids that can possibly be made into a reference to be assessed for the effect and meaning, and the whole visual on stage. Through the script of *Kena Main* that displays the story of all different people in the society, it is the theatrical performance's role to convey principles of 'truth and false' in life that portrays humanity, applying a sociological approach that uses the knowledge on the acting background, implying time, space, gestures by objects and the body, as well as views, and thoughts.

In the exploration of visual art and identity, the set design for the play of *Kena Main*, the role of art and set designers are vital in analyzing and interpreting the visual aspects to be communicated from the script to reality (on-stage performance). These visual elements are the ones that will give a huge impact to theatrical performances.

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