

## A Semiotic Study of the Relationship between Form and Content in Theater Posters (Case Study: Women's Trick Play (1943))

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### Abstract

Audience is one of the important pillars of the theater art. One way to win the audience's attention in the theater art is to use the announcement (post). A poster is a medium to state the messages and convey the concept. One of the ways to transfer the message is through the signs and its application to the visual arts and poster will be examined in this research as the field of signs' transfer. We deal with an investigation into the semiotics of the relationship between form and content in theater poster in 1950s (1941-1951) in Iran. In this era, the posters are often typically copied from European ones, which are reproduced in stone and monochrome, with no signs of the designer name on themselves. This study seeks to achieve the main purpose, which is the main characteristic of the posters and the relationship between poster form and its content with the play content in 50s decade referring to its findings and studies in relation to the issue in question i.e. an investigation into the relationship between form and content in theater posters in 1950s. The research specifically addresses the issue about the women's trick theater poster (1950s).

**Keywords:** Theater Poster; Form; Content; Layered Semiotics; Women's Trick Theater Poster; Iranian Graphic History

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### 1. Introduction

Poster is the first means of providing information for the communication between the message sender and the message receiver and became closely associated with the painting art more than any other arts in the first century of its life. The form and orientation of the painting art in the twentieth century was greatly influenced by the particular nature and limitations that existed in the

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advertising practices of that century. Poster is considered to be one of the powerful artistic and advertising tools in the theater, and when the show group devolves its poster design, which is one of the most specialized section in graphic, to a skillful designer, then they will witness a successful output. However, when this is done in an unprofessional way, the show poster depreciates at the level of a worthless advertisement in “visual” terms. Therefore, the show will be deprived of having a permanent visual effect, and this can be an inevitable end to a mortal art (Husseini, 1380:8).

Theater poster is one of the most important graphic branches, the production process of which involves encountering and accompanying two arts of graphic and theatre and its space is much more attractive than industrial advertising posters. Theater posters are tasked with informing and winning the audiences irrespective of visual registration of the show date. Theater posters are a window into the world of a play. However, it should also be noted that pedestrians never go out to see the posters, but instead the posters should attract the audience with all their thought and business concerns and convey their message and words in the best possible way as soon as possible.

In general, image and writing are the central element of the announcement and pose its existential character, it is fundamental and the main language of the announcement. The content in the poster is the meaning and main message of the poster in which form and image formats are used in addition to the writing element to express it. The content of theater posters has two parts: 1) theater advertisement; 2) play content. A theater poster is presented as the theater's birth certificate and introduces the name of the theater to the audience in its first move, then gives the audience an idea of what kind of theater the audience will go to watch and up next, announces the show time. The theater without poster would not be shared with its audiences. With these interpretations, two major purposes can be perceived for designing show posters. One is the theater promotion and the other one refers to the title and content of the theater and having proportionality and coordination with the theater title.

Nowadays, perhaps one of the biggest problems of our theater art is the lack of knowledge on the signs, because our awareness to the path and goals will be increased due to recognition of semiotics science in this art. Studying this science can help us to be aware of the signs' role and the role we and others play in establishing the facts of theater art. In the years 1940-1950, the theater was used to advance political and advertising purposes. Theater art was considered as a symbol of progress and intellectual growth during these years and due to the high illiteracy rate in the country, the press was not welcomed, and therefore stacy activities were well welcomed. The present study is about some part of Iranian graphic history. Since the theater art is popular, it is an art for the people, and graphic is the most popular art. Popular artistic investigation in a graphic format such as a poster can help us achieve the art that is rooted in our culture. It should be noted that not every poster is capable of attracting audiences, and viewing a poster does not mean more spectators for that theater. The present research is made out to study the posters (1950s) that have been performed in Iran and investigates them in terms of form structure of the content with regard to the semiotics science. Therefore, we are going to get involved in a case study of women' s trick play poster (1943), one of the posters of 1950s in Iran in this study and to investigate it in terms of content and form structure in layered semiotics method with this particular type of content, based on the fact that which proportionality exists between form and content of women's trick theatre poster with theatre codes and signs in the play text. Two main questions of this study are as follows:

- 1- What are the main features of the women's trick theater poster (in 1950s)?
- 2- What is the relationship between the content of the women's trick play and the content of the women's trick theater poster?

## 2. Semiotics

We considered the semiotics as a theoretical framework theory. Semiotics is the science of studying sign systems (language, codes, etc.), interpretive processes, and research tool to understand the hidden truth behind the signs, mysteries, and cultural symbols and signs (Tajik, 2010: 7). It is the knowledge in which signs are studied, identified, and categorized. Putting an image in a frame transforms it into a text that takes on indicative and meaningful functionality and different layers could be explored (Jamali, Sheikhi, 2018: 72).

In addition, it can be said that the semiotic approach seeks to discover and read the relationships between systems and signs of work by relying on the text world and its most important purpose is to discover the meanings of languages, codes and symbols (Jamali, Sheikhi, 2018: 53). One of the most comprehensive definitions of semiotics is the one of Umberto Eco in the book of *The Principles of Semiotics*: "Semiotics deals with everything that is considered to be a sign. In semiotics expert view, words, images, sounds, hints, gestures, and alike can be signs. Semiotics expert do not study the signs in isolation but they have focused on studying the formation and exchange of meaning in different texts and discourses at "synchronic" and "diachronic" levels (Chandler, 2007: 85).

Semiotics will clarify for us what the signs are made of and what the rules dominant on them. (Emamifar, 2011: 3) Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, and Charles Sanders Pierce, an American philosopher, who lived more or less in one single historical period, are the main founders of what is currently called semiotics (Sojoudi, 2002: 83). Since the domain of the semiotics study is any textual domain that is based on codes or codes in production and exchange of meaning, so it becomes interdisciplinary in nature (Fayyaz, Sarafraz, 2011: 94) so, we decided to investigate the case study (women's trick poster) accordingly.

## 3. Image Semiotics

As of 1950s, semiotics has been a research method, which was especially used in two domains of cognition of indications and perception of communication mechanism (Shokri Kiani, and Kharrazian, 2014: 19).

The purpose of image semiotics is to discover the rules of reading the image and to understand its meanings through discovering visual elements or apparent face of the image, which leads to the analysis of the visual elements configuration and then the analysis of the shapes and discovering the meanings of the image model will be achieved (Shokri Kiani, and Kharrazian, 2014: 19).

Sometimes symbols and visual signs can convey information that words cannot. According to Barthes, the image is more aggressive than the writing; the image is a more accurate sign. The model is several times closer to the subject. The image changes into a writing from the moment that signifies and in this way, it is called the unit of reading like the writing, however, what we know under the title of linguistic systems also contribute to the media and meaning production through intertextuality and sometimes give narrative connotation to the subject (Hassanvand et al., 2005: 98).

Drawing scenes, designs on the wood, fabrics, stone, picture, TV and cinema images can be perceived as images. In the visual arts, the imaginations of poets and artists are visualizations that get alive and the artists portray the meanings of the message from their point of view and two kinds of meanings are formed in the artistic works at this time. The first is the explicit meaning and the second one implicit meaning, each of which has a specific role in conveying the message from the speaker to the audience.

#### 4. Layered Semiotics

Sign is an analytical concept, and the analyst first confronts the text anyway, and then he/she may resort to a tool called "sign" and how to associate it with other signs in other sign systems (Sojoudi, 1, layered semiotics is the result of the discovery of the close relationship between layers of association and multiple cultural codes. In layered semiotics, semantic and semiotics layers are searched and explored. ((Layer marks, as theoretical views that underlie typical applied semiotics, provides the ground for extensive analysis of texts in the context of an interactive and multi-faceted relationship between sign systems and text layers with a complex network of relationships)) (Sujoudi, 7: 2011). Layers form the text in association with each other. The significance and position of the layer semiotics is understood when it provides the examination of multimedia texts, and the picture has gained a prominent place in non-linguistic sections of life in the current era, and even the language itself has gained considerable visual aspect through the visual representation of writing, too. Indeed, it can be possible to evaluate all the different layers that create a multimedia text from the audio layers, which encompasses conversations, music, ambient sounds, and meaningful silence, through visual layers including line and picture and line's sign possibilities with each other (Sujoudi, Farzan 2003: 87).

The text is sometimes a combination of multiple layers, some layers being the main ones. This number of layers causes to create different signs and special codes in the texture of the work. Investigating the association of the visual world and written text and examining the symbolic, indexical, and syntactic signs causes the reading of the layered signs (Hassanvand et. al, 2005: 97). Undoubtedly, layered semiotics signs can contribute to theatre, cinema and visual arts semiotics especially graphics (Shokri Kiani, Kharrazian, 2013: 34). In addition to responding to the implications of a text, layered semiotics provides the means to flourish the latent talents of the texts and to reveal its hidden implications (Jamali, Atefeh, 2018: 57-56). It is therefore possible to divide a work into several layers and according the analysis made, firstly to explain the work and then analyze and finally interpret it. These whole factors provide the analysis of an artwork and hence, we first introduce the ingredient layers of the work.

The constituent layers of a work are:

- *Context (designer's main elements)*: All the elements used in the work to convey the concept including the writing, color, composition, image, visual textures etc. are collectively referred to as "context" semiotics.

- *Message*: The message and meaning in a work are expressed in both explicit and implicit ways. The explicit meaning refers to the relationship between a word with the audience's experiences or in relation to the non-linguistic object. Explicit meaning is a meaning that is more prominent in the vocabulary of the audiences among the multiple meanings of a word, and the implicit meaning can be understood as a concept and meaning farther than the explicit one.

A: Explicit message

B: Implicit message

*Layer*: Each of the constituent elements of the "context" has its own special segmentation. Generally, the layers existing in an image can be named in this way.

*Writing (text) layer*: This layer contains all the texts existing in the layout including lyrics, text, numbers etc. and the type of the writing and line used whether calligraphy or typing, the textual attribute of the writing (for example, if a particular concept is emphasized in the text) will be fully described.

*Image layer*: Images used in work includes photography, illustration, painting, etc. are introduced, and its details such as form, extent, meaning, etc. are introduced.

*Color Layer:* This layer introduces the colors used in the work separately along with the meaning of the color according to the work and is also measured in composition section in terms of breadth.

*Composition Layer:* It includes the design fundamentals' principles such as: types of rhythm (alternating rhythm, non-alternating rhythm), contrast (color contrast, size contrast, direction contrast, etc.), composition etc (Shokri Kiani, Kharrazian, 2014: 34-35).

Case study: women's trick theater poster



**Fig 1** Women's trick representation (play), Year: 1943, Quarterly of Theatre for theatrical Researches, No. 4 and 5.

*Poster description:* Picture (1) of the play announcement (women's trick). This announcement was published at Tabriz Information Printing House on 1943. The show was performed on Friday, July 23, 1943 at Lion and Red Sun Exhibition by Ferdowsi Theatrical Actors, magnificent and glorious show of women's trick in three scenes, including a detailed concert scene directed by Arab Oghli, deputy director: Mohammadi, director in charge: Sarhaddar.

This poster was designed to represent women's trick on 1943 and was published in Tabriz Information Printing House. This poster was printed in black color on straw Alvan paper. The printing house name was put in some place of the poster (mainly at the footer of the poster) that probably either was a signature, that is, they put the printing house name to emphasize their professional identity so that everyone would know in which printing house the poster was adorned or likely had an administrative aspect namely police, municipality, finance office or any other public organization be able to observe print works and identify potential violators, due to these reasons it was approved that the name of the printer be engraved at the bottom of the printing work. There is no information of the poster designer. The announcement is horizontal and the organizer's logo is shown at the top of the page and the day and month are mentioned around the logo. A combination of picture and writing are used in this announcement and different sizes of writing are applied on the announcement and have taken up the picture of more space of the announcement screen. In the announcement of women's trick, the image is dominant on the writing at the page and the writing has less visual value.

A story is about to be narrated in the middle of the design, with two female portraits on top and two male portraits on the bottom of the narrative. The frame's blank spaces are filled with the text between the pictures, and the title is seen larger than the other texts with the Nastaliq line at the bottom of the frame.

## 5. Semiotics Analysis of Women's Trick Poster based on Layered Semiotics

### 5.1. Layers Existing in the Image

**Text Layers:** The text in this image contains two sections.

A) Textual written with Nastaliq line in fine and sometimes change in thickness of lines



**Fig 2** Women's trick representation (Authors, 2018).

(B) Title of "women's trick" poster written in Nastaliq script.

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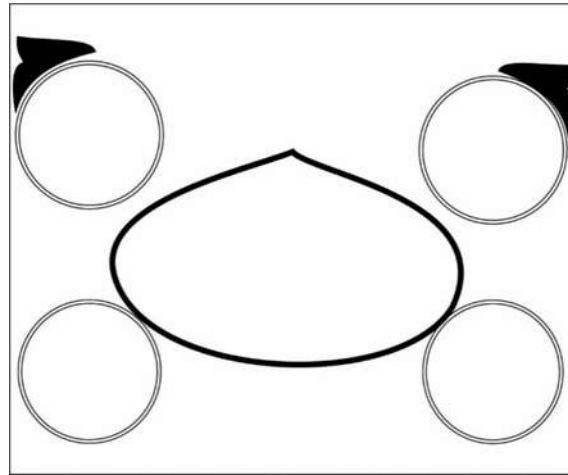
**Image Layer:** The image layer in this announcement contains three sections.

A) Portrait and figurative



**Fig 3** Women's trick representation (Authors, 2018).

b) Forms



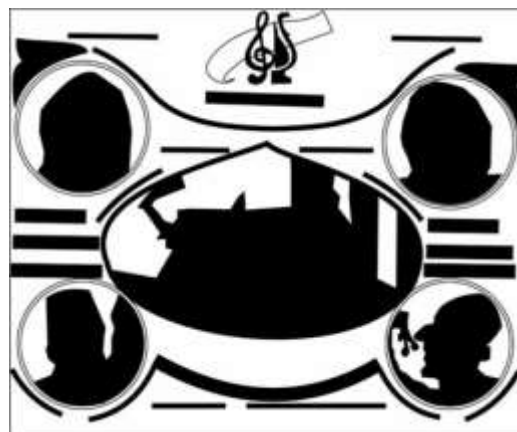
**Fig 4** Women's trick representation (Authors, 2018).

(C) The logo of the organizer center



**Color layer:** During these periods, the announcements were often printed in monochrome (black).

**Composition layer:** The composition in this announcement is symmetrical. In this poster, the visual and written elements have occupied the entire space. The main visual element that narrates the story is centered in the frame. The text's layout is accompanied by angle change, which rotates the viewer's eye across the page and draws the eye to the main element of the design, which is centered. Proportions are not abided in the announcement. The settings are approximate, the forms are not exactly aligned



**Fig 5** Women's trick representation (Authors, 2018).

## 5.2. Analysis

In this poster, the designer has combined the text and image with each other. In this announcement, the designer has considered the announcement message, which includes the signal received from the play, in the center of the box in the center of the audience view because of its importance. In the above announcement, it seems the announcement designer has designed the announcement with a full awareness based on the playwright and signs received from the playwright. It is as if the designer depicts the main characters of the play on the page in the structure of the announcement and uses a circular form, which is complete shape and represents movement, repetition etc. At that time, the artist used the portrait of the actors in a drawing style inspired by the painting art with regard to the type of illustration of that period. By simplifying, or so-called "stylizing" the image, they began creations, the similarities with the subject of which is still distinguishable for the public in all their simplicity and briefness.

At the very simple iconic level, there are signs in each play that bring about a similar mindset in the mind of the theatre actors from a director to actors and costume and scene designers and ultimately to the poster designer and the designer can communicate with the audience by considering these signs in the announcement and make them happy to see the show. The designer has used iconic signs in this announcement, which would be immediately recognizable, are the direct image of the subject. These "icons" can be both realistic and photographic or very refined. The very important point in this announcement, which can be mentioned, is the story of the script, which deals with the women's trick that is evident well in the image at the center of the announcement. The designer has put the picture in an almost oval frame, which is centered and is focused on the inside and associates a balanced situation, referring to the infinity and infinite concept that is perfectly consistent with the women's trick, which is permanent and infinitely compatible.

Representation of the theater scene for interaction between the viewer and producer of the image is made as well in this announcement. Women's image being placed at the top of the announcement refers to the ideal position or real essence and in terms of ideality of an element, it means that the element is in an ideal position or general essence of the reality, so placing the women's image at the top makes us near to the title of women's trick show, which is an intrinsic trick and this part of the image is ideologically the most prominent part of the image. And the men's image being placed at the low part is real and very close to the terrestrial data and goes away from the divinity (that is why we write "In the name of God" at the top and center of the page). Using the writing elements at the top and below has semantic implications for the importance of lower text: (terrestrial), high (heavenly) relative to the image. The image element has been imaged and designed to further emphasize the title and to fully serve the content of the announcement. Choosing the proper color is a major contributor to the effectiveness of the poster and success in its informing task, but what is certain is that the past artist was involved in printing limitations and inevitably used monochrome announcements, which was often prepared in stone and lead printing method. Because printing technology in Iran had not advanced as much as today and the proliferation of posters was limited to the incumbent possibilities, the designer took the responsibility of communicating with the audience, taking into account the limitations and irrespective of many visual effects such as (using color diversification).

All the elements existing in the frame including the image (face, figure), writing (all fine and big writings), color (black) and white background are symmetrically combined in the above announcement to convey the concept of the subject (announcement) with the audience (viewer). Explicit implications in this announcement is actually detailed description of the main character of



the announcement, which includes the women around the box and a man hiding in the box, with four faces consisting of two women and two men on four sides of the frame. "Women's trick" is written in Nastaliq, which represents the Iranian spirit and culture and has delicacies and soft circulations in movements and shape of the letters so that it represents the spirit and taste of Iranians' art in the best way and exhibits an excellent picture of civilization and experience and is recognized as a symbol of Iranian art.

### 5.3. Interpretation

The way of expression in this work is in visual and written form and the main concept of the design is expressed explicitly. The designer used the letter highlighting and confined some sentences for greater emphasis and attention. In addition to the visual points, what is important in a theater poster, is to win the viewer's attention. The designer and director has tried to highlight some parts of the announcement paying attention to the implicit indication of the words such as "luxury, glorious and prestigious show", referring to the place where the ticket is sold "ticket will be sold at the exhibition counter every day", "the ticket costs from 5 Rials to 40 Rials" and could indeed come close to its intended meaning indication by getting help of the iconic signs.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was conducted to better understand the study of the poster form and content in theater posters in Iran during the 1940-1950s. During this period, poster was applied as a media to attract audiences to theater salons due to the financial problems and lack of current facilities. We have selected the theater posters as an advertising medium in this study. Then, we examined the form and content of the theater posters (case study of women's trick, 1943) with regard to the research title using the layered semiotics method. The data applied in this research will be tested in layered semiotics method and its application in artistic texts' analysis of Farzan Sojoudi. According to the theoretical issues and theories of the present study, it can be said that the most prominent feature with regard to the time of this poster's design and the limitations existing in the printing industry is that it is monochrome. In that era, the announcements were proliferated in the form of stone printing. The symmetry of the elements existing in the plate is evident in this announcement. Symmetry and monochromatic are among the features of the posters of the 20s and 30s in Iran.

The results showed that the signs existing in this poster communicated with their own audience using the signs familiar with their cultural environment at that time with the most familiar expression (simple expression) and tried to keep the story up to date and used the actors portrait's design method in women's trick announcement utilizing the printing facilities available at that time to form images while following the textual signs using the incumbent visual signs. All the elements and layers were formed interacting with each other and within the context of that era. Studying the visual signs and their correspondence with textual signs has led to the discovery of deeper layers of the concepts and has made the achievement of the probable intended goals possible. In this work (women's trick poster), the writing layer includes Friday of July 23, 1943, Ferdowsi Theatrical at Red Sun and Lion Exhibition - on behalf of Tabriz' most famous and skilled actors of Tabriz Ferdowsi's opert and drama theatrical - famous, luxury and glorious show in three screens including one screen of detailed concert- Ticket cost from 5 rials to 40 rials - The ticket will be sold daily at the exhibition counter - women's trick- director: Arab Oghli - vice director, Mohammadi - the start of the screening will be on 4 1/2 o' clock without delay - Tabriz Information Printing House - Kouchak Khan Press manager - Head in charge, Sarhaddar, the

image layer includes (actors' portrait and geometric shapes), color layer (black), composition layer (symmetrical). The artist in the past has attracted the attention of the audience by considering factors such as size in the creation of visual and writing elements, the artistic utilization in place or the appropriate change of the font in a way that it could associate more emphasis and attention to the women's trick theatre poster. The women's trick poster is composed of image and texts, and the designer has highlighted some parts of the poster for more emphasis and attention and has confined some statements. The results showed that there was a relationship among the women's trick theatre poster, pictorial signs and the content of women's trick play.

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