

# A Semiotic Approach to Noh Aesthetics

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In her article, “Aristotle’s Poetics and Zeami’s Teaching on Style and the Flower,” Megumi Sata analyzes concepts that are common in the two theories on theatre. She explains how these thinkers express such ideas as imitation, play structure, and audience reaction. Her main argument in the article is that Aristotle is a text-oriented philosopher who analyzed plays from an informed spectator’s point of view while Zeami is a performance-oriented artist who theorized his practice. However, she does not fully explain why the two have such different attitudes toward theatre. Because they set the standard of aesthetics in Western and Japanese drama, it is crucial to examine the reasons behind the contrasts in their concepts. In this study, I will examine Zeami’s theory of acting in order to clarify the differences between the two theories of performance aesthetics.

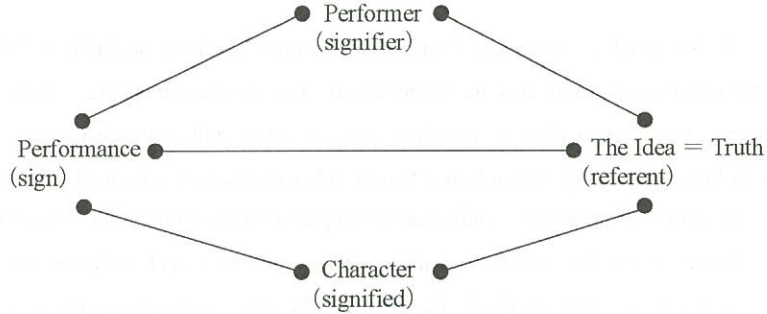
In order to examine the concept of aesthetics, we must first discuss the terms “imitation” and “truth.” In any society, theatre involves imitation (or mimesis). Thus, the aesthetics of theatre in a given society are closely related to people’s attitude toward imitation. In Western theatre, Plato’s concept of the truth-copy model has been the most influential. In Book X of *The Republic*, he outlines the dichotomy between “truth” (or “idea”) and its “copy” - a degraded imitation. According to Plato, tragic poets are not creators, but imitators removed from the truth, or the idea, originally created by God (287-93). This philosopher’s theory of mimesis has become the model of imitation in Western theatre.

While Plato said mimesis was a degradation of the truth, Aristotle’s *Poetics* emphasized the affirmative aspects of mimesis. Defining theatre as an imitation of action, Aristotle believed that spectators feel catharsis through awe and pity and become wiser by witnessing the actors’ imitation of human action on stage. Unlike Plato, Aristotle was concerned with the emotional burden people carry in their everyday lives, and felt it was important for them to forget their troubles, if only for a while. Therefore, although he agreed with Plato’s truth-copy model, Aristotle considered theatre to be necessary and valuable.

To Aristotle, theatrical mimesis, which provokes its spectators to catharsis, does not mean just making a semblance true to life, but creating an artistic expression which is closer to the idea: “[I]t is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen”(68). In other words, although adapting Plato’s truth-copy model, Aristotle puts a positive value on

theatre, asserting that theatrical mimesis evokes the idea.

In semiotic terms, theatrical performance is regarded as a sign which spectators decode in terms of the paradigm of the society to which they belong. To Aristotle (and also to Plato), performers are signifiers; characters, the signified; and referents, the idea/truth. These can be diagrammed as follows:



Performers, characters and the idea co-exist even before a performance begins. In other words, a performance (sign) is embodied by a semiotic arrangement of the signifier, signified, and referent.

In Greek theatre, the semiotic arrangement mentioned above is theatrical mimesis, from which beauty emerges. In order to analyze a performance, then, it is reasonable to examine the text because it charts the relationship between the semiotic elements. In *Poetics*, Aristotle analyzes the mimesis of a performance in relation to the idea, establishes its grammar, and finally finds the poetry in a work.

Similar to the Western concept of idea, as Masakazu Yamazaki points out, the Japanese theorist Zeami also uses terms such as essence (*hon-i*) and understanding oneself (*gaibun*) in his description of imitation (*monomane*) in theatre.

The old man in *Koi no omoni* does not depict the psychological pathos of that single individual. What is shown is the particular lot in life of an old man in love. Zeami calls these human roles or life essences *hon-i* or *gaibun*.... In Zeami's concept of *gaibun* we can see Aristotle's concept of "idea".... Zeami is aiming at the ideal semblance of any old person, not an individual real old person(241-2).

It is true that Zeami deals with character types and puts an emphasis on representing the essence of each type. However, it is doubtful that Zeami shares the Western concept of the idea because his theories are heavily influenced by the Zen Buddhism of the period.

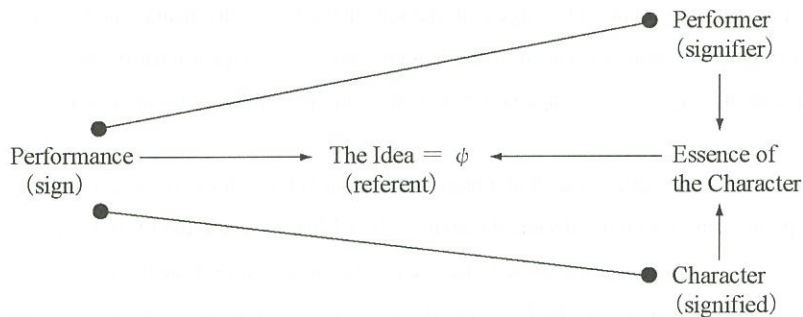
The most advanced stage of *monomane* is "entering into the essence of the role." Thus, reaching the sphere of *gaibun* should be considered parallel to *satori* (enlightenment) in Zen

Buddhism. Satori is a spiritual awakening by entering into the sphere of nothingness. This “[e]nlightenment means seeing through to your own essential nature ... the essential nature ... the essential nature of the cosmos and of all things.... In Zen [this essential nature] has ... been called nothingness” (Dumoulin,153).

Roland Barthes notes that, “What Zen calls satori ... is no more than a panic suspension of language, the blank which erases in us the reign of the Codes” (74-5). Zen recognizes no god. Because the truth is nothingness, the Western concept of the perfect idea does not exist. In *Teaching on Style and the Flower*, Zeami writes,

If you have attained a certain art rank in the field of monomane, you will not think of imitating...; if you have mastered monomane and reached the stage at which you can get into the skin of your part, you will not think of imitating(90).

Zeami values nothingness in imitation. Thus, in the sphere of nothingness, the idea of a thing or a person is realized through an imitation. In Zeami’s theory, the semiotic diagram becomes the following:



According to Zeami, a performer reaches the essence (or the idea in the Western sense) of the character only through an appropriate imitation. In other words, the essence is not something that has always existed, but appears through the dynamic embodiment of each semiotic element. Only a skillful and refined imitation enables the performer to transform himself into the essence of the character. Compared to the Western notion of imitation, the semiotic function of a performance is reversed. Thus, we have to discard the assumption that mimesis derives from the idea. In Noh, it is only through mimesis that the idea is created.

In Noh theatre, the idea is empty before a performance begins. More precisely, performance is the process of creating the idea, or entering into nothingness, through mimesis. By employing such concepts as monomane, yugen and hana, Zeami theorizes a performance as a process and mimesis as a tool for its processing.

Monomane is the fundamental concept in Zeami’s theory. As mentioned earlier, it

means “role-playing” or “type-playing,” and is the technique in mimesis which provides the basis for characters’ actions. In *Teachings on Style and the Flower*, Zeami explains that,

... monomane is to imitate perfectly all kinds of persons, other beings and so on. ... we should imitate very minutely the speech and behavior of persons of rank and office, and the tasteful beauties of nature. However, we should not imitate the vulgar behavior of rustics so minutely. The extent of monomane should depend upon persons. (14-5)

Zeami’s concept of monomane is akin to the Western theory of verisimilitude with its class bias, such as in Horace and Renaissance neo-classicism. However, Zeami is less concerned with characters’ decorum than with performers’ beauty on stage. In order to reach the essence of a role, Zeami believes that a performer has to make his performance beautiful apart from what kind of person he is portraying. Monomane needs beautifying to be perfect and key to the beautification of a performance is *yugen*.

*Yugen*, as Toyoichiro Nogami points out, is synonymous with elegance or grace (53). At first, Zeami finds *yugen* in the nobility and culture of the court and incorporates it into his dramatic theory. To Zeami, the *yugen* of human character is the beauty and gentleness that emanate from an aristocrat; the *yugen* of the human body is the elegant position and conduct of an aristocrat; and the *yugen* of language is the elegant language employed by an aristocrat, especially in poetry.

In order to explain *yugen* at a more metaphysical level, however, Zeami later introduces the concept of *riken-no-ken* or “detached vision”. In *A Mirror Held to the Flower*, Zeami says that

... an actor must come to have an ability to see himself as the spectators do, grasp the logic of the fact that the eyes cannot see themselves, and find the skill to grasp the whole—left and right, ahead and behind. If an actor can achieve this, his peerless appearance will be as elegant as that of a flower or a jewel and will serve as a living proof of his understanding. (81)

While monomane requires a performer to identify with the role he is portraying, *yugen* demands that he keep a part of his mind free, alert to the effect that he creates, and observant to his own performance as others see it. The objective clarity of his critical mind enables a performer to achieve *yugen*, i.e., to make his performance elegant and graceful. In light of its emphasis on the objectivity in performance, Zeami’s *yugen* resembles Diderot’s paradox of an actor and Brecht’s V-effect.

*Yugen* is presentational while monomane is representational. Even though they are different in nature, however, monomane and *yugen* are inseparable because they complement each other in theatrical mimesis. In other words, mimesis in Noh theatre is a unique combination of presentational *yugen* and representational monomane. Deliberately enhancing each other by

contrast, *monomane* and *yugen* create a variety of effects, which are new to the spectators. This novelty is the ideal beauty called *hana*, or “flower,” in Noh theatre.

*Hana* is the core of Zeami’s theory of theatre. For what Zeami essentially attempts to explain is the grammar of *mimesis* which evokes *hana* in the spectators’ minds. In *Teaching on Style and the Flower*, Zeami describes *hana* as the following:

The audience find interesting what looks novel to them. Therefore, flowers, interestingness and novelty are of the same nature. No flowers will remain unfaded. Since they fade away, it is novel that they bloom when they are to bloom. In the *No*, too, first you stick to only one style of acting. It is novel that you do not stick to only one style of acting but proceed to other styles of acting. (85)

Zeami sees many layers in *hana*. Occasionally, ordinary performers may possess a kind of temporary or partial *hana*, such as the *hana* of youthfulness or the *hana* of voice. However, only a master performer can attain the ultimate *hana* by reaching the essence of the character he portrays and realizing the idea in the sphere of nothingness. Therefore, by challenging his mental and physical limits through his performance, the master performer himself creates the idea. However, it must be emphasized that the art of Noh indeed does not lie in what is created, but in the process of creating it. Here again, compared to the Western model of theatre, we see the relationship between the four semiotic elements of the idea reversed; the idea proves to be nothingness.

To Zeami, the whole life of a performer, as well as the performance itself, is the process of attaining *hana*. Therefore, as *Bethe* and *Brazell* point out, unlike Western theatre, performance in Noh is not clearly separated from rehearsal.

There are no drills to prepare the voice or the body, no scales to run through or warming up exercises, no role playing or breathing exercises, no exercises to improve concentration or rhythm; there is only performance. Practice is always performing bits of a play and is usually done without interruption....

In this sense practice is performance. (176)

Practice becomes performance; performance becomes practice. The cycle of the practice-performance relationship covers the whole life of a performer. In this sense, life becomes performance; and performance becomes life.

In Noh theatre, what is fascinating is that spectators witness a self-disciplined performer challenge his mental and physical limits and finally enter into “a sphere of consciousness unknown to the average person” (*Bethe* and *Brazell*, 185). In his theory, Zeami’s main interest is to explain how to reach the highest level of performance.

Thus, the differences between Aristotle’s and Zeami’s theories lie in their aesthetics in

relation to performance. While Aristotle finds his ultimate beauty in the performance as a product, Zeami finds his ultimate beauty in the performance as a process. In Zeami's theory, the (platonic) idea is empty. Through mimesis consisting of monomane (role-playing) and yugen (elegance), a performer realizes the idea in the sphere of nothingness. Performance is regarded as a process of creating the idea, rather than a product that derives from it. Only after realizing this can we understand Zeami's theory is performance-oriented and Aristotle's, text-oriented.

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