

The Existence of the Blind Radio Drama to Represents the Real World

Eksistensi Drama Radio Buta Merepresentasikan Dunia Nyata

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Abstract

Radio drama, as an auditory medium, is often perceived as 'blind' due to its lack of visual modality, making its representation of reality a unique challenge. This qualitative research, employing a semiotic analysis approach, aims to analyze the forms of denotative and connotative messages in radio drama and examine its strategies for conveying a story that listeners can understand. Data were collected through literature study and in-depth interviews with listeners, then analyzed interactively. The results indicate that radio drama constructs understanding through audio symbols, such as dialogue, sound effects, and music, which listeners recognize based on prior sensory experiences. These symbols convey not only literal meaning (denotative) but also evoke emotional and cultural values (connotative). Therefore, although "blind," radio drama richly represents the real world through the power of sound and the listener's active imagination, proving that the absence of visuals is not a limitation but a unique characteristic that enables the creation of its own reality.

Abstrak

Drama radio, sebagai medium auditif, sering dianggap "buta" karena tidak menyertakan modalitas visual, sehingga representasi realitasnya menjadi tantangan tersendiri. Penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan analisis semiotika ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bentuk pesan denotatif dan konotatif dalam drama radio serta mengkaji strateginya dalam menyampaikan cerita yang dapat dipahami pendengar. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi literatur dan wawancara mendalam dengan pendengar, kemudian dianalisis secara interaktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa drama radio membangun pemahaman melalui simbol-simbol audio, seperti dialog, efek suara, dan musik, yang dikenali pendengar berdasarkan pengalaman inderawi sebelumnya. Simbol-simbol ini tidak hanya menyampaikan makna harfiah (denotatif) tetapi juga membangkitkan nilai emosional dan kultural (konotatif). Dengan demikian, meskipun "buta," drama radio justru merepresentasikan dunia nyata secara kaya melalui kekuatan suara dan imajinasi aktif pendengar, membuktikan bahwa ketiadaan visual bukanlah bentuk keterbatasan, melainkan keunikan yang memungkinkan terciptanya realitas tersendiri.



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1. Introduction

Radio drama is a type of drama that conveys a story through dialogue and action for its listeners or audience, aiming to impart values of national character and culture. However, its presentation is purely auditory, involving performers delivering lines, complemented by sound effects and music (Prusdianto et al., 2019). Radio drama experienced its golden age in Indonesia since the 1980s. During this period, it was dominated by martial arts stories set in Java, along with a smaller number of non-martial arts narratives (Susanti, 2015). The production of radio dramas continues to this day, although it has undoubtedly diminished due to the proliferation of more comprehensive media.

Radio drama offers a unique quality cherished by its enthusiasts, yet this very characteristic leads others to deem it irrelevant or unsatisfactory due to its lack of visual representation (Cazeaux, 2005). It is often perceived as a "blind" medium and an impoverished art form because it represents the world without images, excluding the highly informative modality of sight.

Rudolf Arnheim, in his book on radio published in London in 1936, argued that radio drama is more sensorially deficient and incomplete than other arts due to its exclusion of the most crucial sense: Vision. However, music does not receive this criticism, primarily because it functions within its own acoustic framework and does not claim to possess overt representational

content. In other words, music does not necessarily refer to or include specific objects, events, or narrative structures.

This negative perception of radio can be addressed in two ways. The first is to question the assumption that equates blindness with impoverishment, and, second, to assert that every individual, within the range of sensory phenomena available to them, enjoys a rich and diverse experience that is comparable. Therefore, although radio drama is blind, this is not a valid reason to judge it as an obsolete form.

In terms of its function, radio is a medium, tool, and means for conveying messages. An idea is the foundation of a message, encapsulated in a plot; this idea is then written into a story. The story is subsequently processed into a production delivered via the radio medium in the form of a drama (Prusdianto et al., 2019). A key advantage of radio drama compared to conventional theatre is its accessibility; it can be listened to anywhere and anytime as it is formatted as an audio file.

Based on this introduction, this study discusses what is often considered a fundamental challenge in radio drama presentation. To elaborate on this issue, the author utilizes various literatures, articles, books, and other relevant information to provide a comprehensive explanation. The specific problems addressed in this study is formulated as follows.

1. What are the forms of denotative and connotative messages in Radio drama?
2. How does radio drama convey a story that listeners can understand?

2. Review of Related Literatures

Radio Drama as an auditory medium and 'blindness'

The traditional perspective of Arnheim (in Rodero, 2012) is the basis for scholarly discourse regarding radio drama as an auditory medium and 'blindness'. He claimed that radio drama is a 'deficient' and 'incomplete' art form. However, Cazeaux (2005) challenges the negative viewpoint by employing a phenomenological perspective and argued that 'blindness' really creates space for a distinctive and interactive, imaginative experience in which listeners co-create the narrative world. Based on this perspective, this paper is grounded in viewpoint by Cazeaux (2005) which rejects the visual deficit narrative while expanding it by using a semiotic method to precisely investigate how auditory symbols contribute to the construction of the reality, not simply in general.

Semiotics and meaning construction in audio media

The theoretical basis in this paper is significantly relied on Barthes' ideas (1967) of denotation and connotation which provide the foundation of analyzing layers of meaning in signs. Even though the ideas are sometimes used in visual media, there is still the field for investigation when applying them to

auditory media. Denotation refers to the actual sounds made in auditory media, such as speech, music, or sound effects (Sassenrath, 1967). Meanwhile, connotation includes the feeling, cultural connotations, and symbolic meanings, associated with the sounds, e.g. the sounds of a siren indicating an emergency, yet suggesting urgency, danger, or terror (Harbin & Wright, 1967). Scholars, such as Danesi (2012) and Sobur (2006) have developed this idea in the area of communication, focusing in the comprehension of non-verbal signs, for example, sound, based on cultural standards. Meanwhile, this technique is implemented in this study to examine how listeners perceive music and sound effects. The position of this study is to employ Barthes, Danesi, and Sobur's idea specifically to analyze primary data from interviews, allowing for an empirical understanding of the audience's denotative and connotative meaning decoding process.

The era of imagination and 'Soundscape' in audio narratives

The concept of the role of imagination and 'soundscape' in audio narrative is focused in Crook's (1999) idea. He emphasized the significance of creating a detailed soundscape to generate a sense of location, time, and ambiance to lead the listener's imagination. The acoustic environment as people perceive it in context is known as the 'soundscape' and it plays an active role in narrative rather than just serving as a background (Aletta et al., 2018; Liu, 2024). In addition, Rodero (2010, 2012) demonstrates

the auditory stimuli in radio drama can elicit strong and consistent emotional and imaginative reactions in listeners, which are comparable to audiovisual stimuli. These reactions are further regulated by elements including emotional valence, attention, age, and individual differences, to illustrate the complexity of auditory perception and its influence on cognitive and affective processes (Mishra & Gazzaley, 2012). By implementing the findings of Rodero (2012) in the context of Indonesian listeners, this study aims to support and contextualize the radio drama auditory stimuli.

To sum up, the literature review demonstrates that while phenomenological and soundscape production implementation have been used to investigate radio drama, there is still a need for research that combines denotative and connotative level semiotic analysis with actual listener perception. By providing a thorough examination of the sign mechanism in radio drama and how listeners interpret it to reconstruct reality, this study examines the gaps and how 'blindness' is the foundation of its representational aspect.

3. Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. The study aims to provide a systematic description and semiotic analysis of the messages and narrative structures in radio drama, aligning with the qualitative paradigm that seeks to understand phenomena in

their natural setting (Miles et al., 2014).

The data sources consisted of both primary and secondary data. The primary data was derived from in-depth interviews with two regular listeners of radio drama, selected purposively based on their familiarity and engagement with the medium. The secondary data was obtained from a literature study of relevant scholarly works, including books and journal articles on semiotics, radio drama, and media studies.

The data comprised two types: (1) Verbal data from the interview transcripts, detailing the listeners' experiences and interpretative processes. (2) Textual data from the literature, which provided the theoretical concepts for analysis. Data collection was conducted through two techniques. Firstly, in-depth interviews were carried out using a semi-structured interview guide to explore the listeners' understanding of denotative and connotative messages and their strategies for comprehending the story. Secondly, a systematic literature review was performed to gather theoretical insights.

The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis method based on a semiotic model, specifically examining the denotative and connotative levels of signs (Barthes, 1967). The analysis followed an interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). The verbal data from the interviews were coded and interpreted to identify patterns and themes related to the listeners' comprehension, which were then

triangulated with the findings from the literature to ensure validity.

4. Results and Discussion Denotative and Connotative Messages in Radio Drama

The term 'drama' originates from the Greek words *draomai* or *dran*, meaning to act, to do, or to perform. In its contemporary context, drama has a broader meaning, often associated with literary works, and more specifically, it refers to a script for performance (Prusdianto & Zulviana, 2019). Specifically, N. Riantiarno (2011: 4) in his book "*Kitab Teater...*" explains that the understanding of drama contains several core principles: (1) drama is the written text for theatre, (2) it contains problems or conflicts and their resolutions within various situations, and (3) it is a type of literature performed on stage, primarily presented through dialogue.

Regarding radio drama, which relies solely on sound to convey messages and immerse listeners in the story, this auditory nature presents a distinct challenge for the performers and the unity of its elements. The presentation of radio drama inevitably utilizes semiotic principles to enable listeners to comprehend every atmosphere presented and the essence of the story. One fundamental way to understand meaning is through the classification of denotative and connotative meaning.

According to Tinarbuko (2013), denotative meaning encompasses the things to which words refer (referential meaning). Similarly, he posits that denotative meaning

involves the explicit connection between a sign and its reference or reality at the denotative level of signification. Furthermore, Tinarbuko (2013) cites Spradley (1997), who states that connotative meaning includes all suggestive significance of a symbol that goes beyond its referential meaning. Piliang (1998) further elaborates that connotative meaning involves aspects related to emotion, feeling, cultural values, and ideology.

Daily life teaches the human senses to respond to surrounding stimuli. Sensory experiences mean that when a sense perceives something previously encountered, it is spontaneously recognized. To know the meaning of something, one must first recognize it as a sign, which implies that signs possess structure. Specifically, something is a sign if: (1) it can be distinguished from other forms, and (2) it can be constructed in a predictable way (Danesi, 2012:12). The first property is known as paradigmatic structure and the second as syntagmatic structure. For instance, in life, we can distinguish a goat from a cow based on their forms and sounds; thus, hearing their sounds alone allows us to differentiate them. All human senses collaborate to interpret everything encountered in life.

The presentation of radio drama, which relies solely on hearing, invites listeners to imagine the narrative as if it were visible. The words and sounds heard in a radio drama are symbols. A symbol represents its referent in a conventional way, and any signifier (an object, sound, figure, etc.) can be symbolic (Danesi, 2012:38). White represents

cleanliness/purity/innocence, dark represents stained/dirty/despicable, and a dome image represents a mosque. These diverse meanings are built through social consensus or cultural transmission. It is this type of representation that is conveyed in radio drama.

Radio Drama Presentation in Conveying the Story Message

The scriptwriting for radio drama is not arbitrary; rather, it is based on specific references or sources. Scriptwriters draw from personal experiences, environmental observations, books, novels, history, and other sources. Consequently, it is common to find scripts that are reincarnations of real events (Sahid et al., 2017). Writers often conduct observations or preliminary research to create a satisfying script that will receive a positive response from the audience. Frequently, the stories presented in radio dramas are derived from societal events. Such scripts are based on cultural research, which is synonymous with the study of humans and is humanistic in nature (Endraswara, 2006:74). Cultural research is fundamentally linked to the collectivity of society, which possesses a social system and its respective supporters.

Endraswara (2006:75-76), quoting Suparlan (1983), explains that research on culture can be viewed as analogous to ethnographic research. Ethnographic research is the process of systematically gathering information or data about a way of life, related social activities, and cultural objects of a society, based on which a description of that

society's culture is produced. This description encompasses the meanings of objects, actions, and events in social life, according to the views of the key figures or actors involved.

Based on Suparlan's explanation, understanding the meaning conveyed in radio drama is not far from understanding everything in our surroundings. It is not an exaggeration to state that theatre, drama, and radio drama are visualizations of real life written into a script and then re-performed with some embellishments to make it more engaging.

Social life provides a multitude of things that, consciously or not, enable the brain's capacity to produce and understand visible signs; this is called semiosis. Meanwhile, the activity of forming knowledge, made possible by the brain's capacity, is called representation. Representation is defined as the use of signs (in this case, images, sounds, etc.) to connect, describe, capture, or reproduce something seen, sensed, imagined, or felt in a specific physical form (Danesi, 2012:20)

Sahid (2004), in his book '*Semiotika Teater*' quotes Aston & Savona (1991), who state that the semiotics of a dramatic text bases its analysis on three elements: plot construction, character, and dialogue. Generally, a story arranges interconnected events. The plot presents a sequence of events woven together based on causal relationships, forming a pattern that drives the story towards conflict and resolution. A well-structured plot must contain elements of surprise

and tension, as these are what engage the listener.

A story in a radio drama would be bland without characters playing their roles. Characterization in radio drama always involves the presentation of a character's traits and the creation of their image. According to Sudjiman (1983), image creation relates to the personal figure of a character, while the presentation of character relates to the revelation of that personal figure (in Sahid, 2004:38). The personal figure of a character in a story can be understood through their actions and expressed dialogues. Dialogue is a crucial element in radio drama. Luxemburg, et al. (1984) suggest that while narrative and commentary are prominent in fiction, dialogue holds the primary position in drama (Sahid, 2004:45-46). A literary work cannot be classified as drama without dialogue.

Elam (1991) in Sahid (2004:47) explicitly states that the realization of drama occurs due to the "I who speaks to you here." Through the exchange of deictic terms (he, I, you), the dramatic world achieves its three-dimensional status: The speakers and listeners point to the actual or mimetic world, and point to the invisible characters, events, and spaces. Furthermore, Elam quotes Austin, who stated that three levels of action can be performed in uttering a single speech act. These three levels consist of: Locution (the act of uttering a meaningful sentence), illocution (the act performed in uttering the sentence, such as making a promise, giving an order, etc.), and perlocution (the effect of the utterance on the

recipient, such as the act of persuading, etc.).

The American philosopher and thinker Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) provided a view on sign relations. As explained in one of Sobur's works (Sobur, 2006) (2006:34), Peirce posits that in life, we encounter signs that are related to their objects through resemblance, cause-and-effect, or conventional agreement. Undeniably, semiotics shows great interest in the production of signs generated by linguistic and cultural communities. Based on this method of sign relations, it is clear that listeners of radio drama can understand the conveyed story and even visualize the atmosphere due to the application of these sign relations.

The first interviewee, Muh. Iriansyah Syarif, aged 24 (2021), expressed that:

"Radio drama is music and dialogue that follows the plot intended by the scriptwriter, without the visuals found in television or film. This is done with a style of speech that matches the demands of the script. To understand the story, I need to listen carefully from beginning to end. I understand the words spoken by the actors based on their dynamics, articulation, and accents (intonations that are unique to individuals based on their region of origin). I understand the story's atmosphere through the supporting music, background sound, and sound effects. The benefit for me is information. Essentially, radio is a longstanding and common medium of information and

communication. Therefore, the concept of radio drama is a good development for me personally, as I have difficulty sleeping, and drama on the radio can narrate a story until I fall asleep. I think radio drama conveys messages depending on the theme; for example, if a theme is unsuitable for certain ages, it should be broadcast at appropriate times."

Referring to Iriansyah's statement, not only the performers play an important role in radio drama, but the editing, recording, and all production departments have crucial tasks in their respective fields. A person can understand a radio drama presentation based on the acting strength of the performers, the mood-setting music, or the sound effects they commonly hear and see in daily life.

When a radio drama's plot depicts a village atmosphere, it is supported by appropriate music, such as flutes, zithers, angklung, and other traditional instruments. Additionally, background sounds or effects resembling bird chirps, duck quacks, and rooster crows will be understood by listeners as representing animals commonly seen nearby. Furthermore, the actors must perform with clear dialogue, good intonation, precise articulation, and suitable character depth. The stories presented in radio drama always use common language to ensure listeners easily understand the meaning.

The second interviewee, Raethur Rahma, aged 25 (2021), stated:

"In radio drama presentations, besides the players or characters, there is also a narrator who reads the

story directions. For example, if there is a scene 'Syren leaves the room, slamming the door...' this sentence will be read by the narrator, followed by the sound of a door slamming. Besides narrator-guided presentations, I also listen to radio dramas without a narrator/prologue. I can understand the storyline based on life experiences. For example, if there is a scene on the beach, I know it is the beach because of the sound of the waves and the wind, plus the characters' dialogue stating that they are on the beach. In radio dramas, I can also tell if a character is angry from their high-pitched or loud tone of voice. There are many benefits to listening to radio drama; first, I can listen with my eyes closed, I can listen while reading, and I can play the drama through a speaker while doing other tasks, whereas watching television requires me to stay in front of the screen until the film ends or until commercials allow me to do other things. Watching a film on television and listening to a radio drama are the same for me. The difference is that television engages my hearing and sight simultaneously, but in radio drama, my hearing works together with my imagination."

Based on the interview with Raethur Rahma, it appears that radio drama has its own patterns for presenting stories. Some radio dramas use a narrator as a guide, while others do not. Radio drama presents stories that can be understood based on previously experienced or observed events. It relies on hearing and imagination to comprehend the conveyed story.

Semiotics is inherently linked to the performance of radio drama for understanding the story, as auditory perception, combined with imagination, allows us to grasp the message. This is because the stories presented through radio drama are depictions or implications of human life.

Every human is endowed with senses to recognize everything in the world. The senses perceive things that are then used as means of communication, both intentional and unintentional, including spontaneous and unintended responses to stimuli (Sobur, 2006:163). Human responses are generally symbolic, whereas animal responses are primarily natural (automatic and spontaneous). Similarly, in radio drama, which presents symbols, listeners familiar with these symbols will understand their meaning.

The symbols conveyed in radio drama are representations of the real world, specifically things humans often experience in daily life. The interpretation of these symbols is strongly supported by the human senses (nose, tongue, skin, ears, and eyes), which work according to their respective functions and often provide interrelated responses.

Taken together, these results and discussion suggest several implications and impact. Firstly, the theoretical implications pointed that this study argues that radio absence of visuals is a strength and offers empirical data to challenge Arnheim's 'visual deficit' theory. By demonstrating how 'blindness' permits different representation, it supports phenomenological perspective and semiotic theory by

Cazeaux (2005). It provides a new perspective for analysis by implementing denotation or connotation to audio by Barthes (1967). Secondly, practical implications contribute to the audio creators when using semiotic principles and to validate audio drama as the potential media in podcast era for the industry. In addition, it also contributes to education and culture area as the powerful instruments for teaching and preserving folklore. Lastly, it draws to the impact in socio-cultural aspect, which indicate that radio drama promotes adaptable entertainment and encourage inclusivity for people with visual impairments. When seeing from Indonesia perspectives, it has the potential to be an advanced instrument for cultural preservation by revitalizing oral traditions and accessing remote communities.

5. Conclusion

Radio drama is a type of drama that is broadcast on radio and depends on the audience's auditory and visual senses to be enjoyable. Because it is entirely auditory, listeners are drawn in and are able to picture the story as though it were real. In a radio drama, the sounds and words serve as symbols, which typically stand in for their referents. A signifier can be anything, including a figure, sound, or item. For example, a dome image denotes a mosque, white stands for purity, cleanliness, and innocence, and dark for stains, dirt, and despicability. Radio theater uses this type of representation to express these various meanings, which are created

through cultural transmission or social agreement.

Ultimately, radio drama stands as an art form that sharpens the audience's sensory intuition in interpreting events. This is achieved through an integrated production process, which includes the actors' deep and character-driven dialogue, the creation of atmosphere using sound effects that represent natural surroundings, and the selection of music that builds emotion and context. All these auditory elements are managed effectively within the radio drama's production framework, enabling the formation of a coherent realism that can be readily translated into the framework of real life. Therefore, despite the absence of visuals, radio drama is not an impoverished medium, but rather an imaginative canvas that allows reality to be represented in a manner that is both rich and personal for each listener.

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