

The See-Through Train: A Semiotic Analysis of Scenography in the Stage Play *Murder on the Orient Express*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the semiotics of scenography in the stage play *Murder on the Orient Express*. Employing a qualitative research approach and textual analysis, the study focuses on the see-through train structure as a central element of storytelling. The findings indicate that the set was designed to replicate a 1930s train carriage, featuring wooden frames, gold-accented Art Deco patterns, and warm-toned lamps. The stage space is open on both sides, allowing audiences to view the performance from multiple perspectives. Semiotic analysis reveals that the see-through train has a denotative meaning, representing the physical setting of the narrative, while its connotative meanings include transparency, truth revelation, the paradox between beauty and violence, and a structural framework that confines the characters. The dual-sided stage space symbolizes multiple perspectives of truth, enabling the audience to act as observers or judges of the characters' actions. This study underscores the significance of scenographic design in conveying semiotic meanings and enhancing the audience's multi-dimensional viewing experience.

Keywords: Scenography, Semiotics, See-Through Train, Scene Design, *Murder on the Orient Express*

Introduction

Stage plays not only provide entertainment for audiences but also serve as mirrors that reflect the values, beliefs, and cultural identities of society within various historical contexts. This function, often referred to as the “Reflection of Society” (Pawarit Chatinamphet, 2018), highlights the theatre’s capacity to communicate social consciousness and collective thought through performance. Adapted works, in particular, bridge the gap between written and performative media, requiring creative reinterpretation to suit the nature of live theatre (Thadaamnuaichai, 2019).

Among the numerous authors whose works have been adapted for the stage, Agatha Christie stands out as one of the most influential. Renowned for her debut novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), which introduced the legendary detective Hercule Poirot, Christie went on to publish 66 novels and 14 short story collections. Her works have sold over one billion copies worldwide and have been translated into more languages than any other author, earning her the title “Queen of Crime” as recognized by UNESCO (Agathachristie.com, 2024). Among her most acclaimed works, *Murder on the Orient Express* remains a timeless classic that continues to captivate both critics and audiences.

The story follows Hercule Poirot on a European train journey intended as a brief holiday after continuous work. However, when a murder occurs among the train’s wealthy passengers—each harboring hidden secrets—Poirot must untangle a complex web of clues to uncover the truth. In 2024, this iconic mystery was reimagined as a stage play for the University Theatrical Arts Festival, created as a creative thesis project by fourth-year students in the Department of Theatre Arts and Creative Entrepreneurship, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University.

This production introduced an innovative scenographic concept titled “The See-Through Train”, featuring a dual-sided open stage design with a centrally positioned set. This spatial composition allows

the audience to view the performance from both sides, transforming the scenography into a symbolic element that embodies themes of transparency, truth, and collective judgment.

Given these considerations, the researcher aims to analyze the semiotic dimensions of scenography in The See-Through Train adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*. As studies on stage adaptations of detective fiction in Thailand remain limited, this research serves as a significant case study that contributes to academic understanding of how scenography can function as a semiotic system—visually and conceptually enriching the storytelling process in contemporary theatre.

Research objective

To analyze the semiotics of scenography in the stage play *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach through documentary research, using textual analysis to examine the semiotics of scenography in the stage play *Murder on the Orient Express*. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source was the stage performance presented in 2024 at the Theatre, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. Secondary sources included academic literature, journal articles, conference proceedings, videos on theatre studies, relevant websites, and previous research related to semiotics and scenography.

The research instrument was a structured content analysis form based on Saussure's semiotic theory (De Saussure & Baskin, 2011), focusing on two levels of meaning: denotative and connotative meanings. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, denotative analysis identified and described the observable physical characteristics of scenographic elements, such as spatial arrangement, materials, transparency, lighting, and stage configuration. Second, connotative analysis interpreted the symbolic meanings of these elements in relation to the narrative and thematic context of the play.

The analytical process involved identifying key scenographic components, classifying their denotative features, interpreting their connotative meanings through semiotic theory, and synthesizing the findings to demonstrate how scenography functions as an integrated semiotic system. The results were presented using descriptive analysis in accordance with the research objectives.

Findings

The semiotic analysis of the stage play *Murder on the Orient Express* is presented as follows.

1. Set Structure. The set structure can be divided into two main components.

1.1 Set Design. The stage was designed as a see-through train, constructed with vertical and horizontal wooden frames to represent train carriages. The set has no solid walls, allowing the audience to see through from the front to the back. The frame features geometric Art Deco patterns corresponding to the 1930s setting of the play, with gold lines painted on black wood, creating a sense of luxury, solemnity, and mystery appropriate for the passengers' social status. The upper part of the set was designed to resemble train windows and doors. Decorative elements include warm-toned lamps above the dining table to create an elegant dining car atmosphere.



Figure 1. The set of the stage play *Murder on the Orient Express* by ssruorientexpress (2024).

1.2 Stage Space. The set was positioned at the center of the stage with entrances and exits on both sides, without background or side walls. This design provides a sense of openness and allows actors to move freely. Such a space enables the audience to perceive the performance from multiple dimensions, both in front of and behind the set. Viewers can choose which side to watch, resulting in different experiences: each side reveals distinct climactic moments or hidden actions. For example, during Ratchett's murder scene, viewers on the left side of the train see Ratchett being attacked but not the murderer, while viewers on the right side see the murderer but not Ratchett at the moment of the attack.

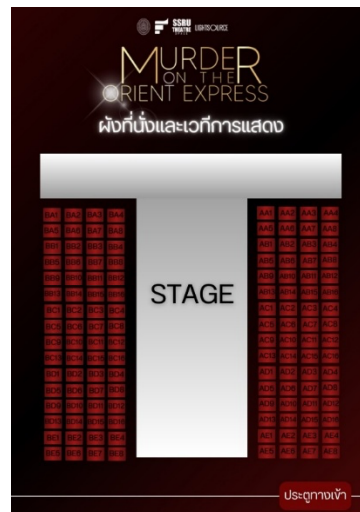


Figure 2. Seating Plan and Stage Layout by ssruorientexpress (2024).

2. Semiotic Analysis of the Set

2.1 The see-through train has a denotative meaning, representing the actual train on stage, which audiences can directly recognize as the setting where the events occur. It functions as the main set, indicating the location of the events on stage in an objective manner that everyone can understand as a train. Its connotative meanings are as follows:

2.1.1 The transparency of the structure signifies the revelation of truth. The set, which allows the audience to see through from both sides, resembles the gaze of an observer who can witness everything. This transparency conveys that nothing is hidden, similar to an investigation in which all secrets must eventually be revealed.



Figure 3. See-Through Train by ssruorientexpress (2024).

2.1.2 The absence of walls signifies the loss of privacy and exposure. While a real train would typically be an enclosed, restricted space, this set is open, conveying that no one can escape the gaze of judgment or the truth. All characters are thus “exposed,” both physically and psychologically, within the same space.



Figure 4. Loss of walls by ssruorientexpress (2024).

2.1.3 The elegance of the Art Deco patterns signifies the aesthetic masking of violence. The intricate and symmetrical gold designs on the set symbolize the sophistication of the upper class; however, beneath this beauty lies murder, creating a paradox between outward appearance and internal reality.



Figure 5. Art Deco by ssruorientexpress (2024).

2.1.4 The use of gold lines signifies the cage of social class and morality. While the gold lines on the set are visually elegant and strong, connotatively they represent a restrictive framework, akin to a cage that confines all characters within the train, leaving no one able to escape the truth or their wrongdoing.

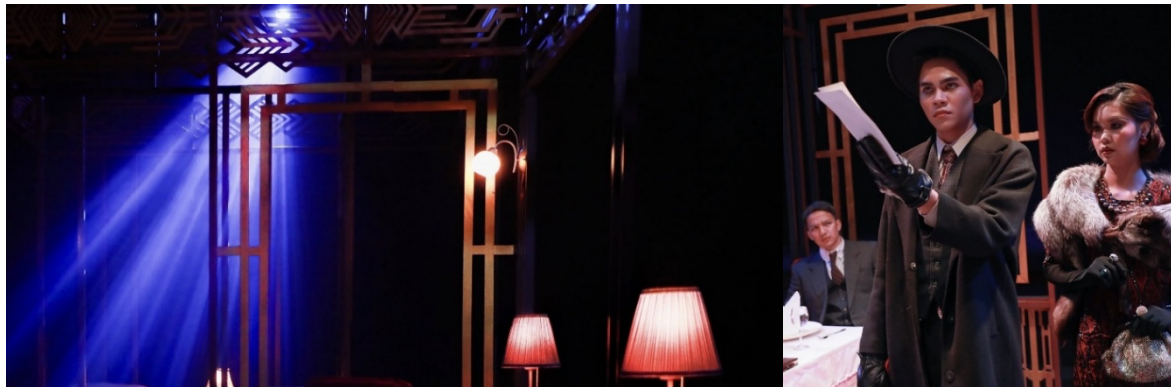


Figure 6. Gold lines by ssruorientexpress (2024).

2.1.5 The warm lighting of the lamps signifies a beautiful deception. Although the light appears warm and luxurious, connotatively it conceals the darkness, death, and murder occurring within. It creates a juxtaposition between the serene and elegant exterior and the brutal reality inside.



Figure 7. The warm lighting by ssruorientexpress (2024).

2.2 Dual-Sided Open Stage. Denotatively, the open stage allows performance visibility from both sides, with no walls or obstructions. Connotatively, it represents the multiplicity of perspectives, suggesting that truth is not singular. This aligns with the play's main concept: the murder is not the act of a single individual but a collective collaboration. The open stage enables the audience to perceive events from both sides, symbolically positioning them as judges who witness all character actions.



Figure 8. Dual-Sided Open Stage by ssruorientexpress (2024).

Conclusions and Discussion

This research analyzed the semiotics of scenography in the stage play *Murder on the Orient Express*, adapted from Agatha Christie's novel, focusing on how visual and spatial elements function as signs that generate meaning through the relationship between the signifier (the physical form of the set) and the signified (the conceptual meanings conveyed to the audience). By examining both denotative and connotative levels of meaning, the analysis demonstrates how scenographic design operates as an active semiotic system rather than a mere visual backdrop.

At the denotative level, the see-through train signifies the primary setting of the narrative—a luxury train consistent with the period and genre of the detective story. At the connotative level, its transparency symbolizes the gradual revelation of truth, the exposure of concealed motives, and the loss of personal privacy among the characters. The aesthetic refinement of the set simultaneously masks violence, reflecting how social decorum conceals moral ambiguity, a function that aligns with Barthes's (1967) concept of layered meaning in sign systems.

Similarly, the dual-sided open stage functions denotatively as an unobstructed performance space, while connotatively it signifies multiple perspectives and the collective nature of guilt within the narrative. By eliminating a fixed frontal viewpoint, the scenography positions the audience as active observers and implicit judges, reinforcing the instability of absolute truth and encouraging critical engagement. This spatial strategy resonates with Sant Suwatcharapinun's (2012) assertion that visual design can operate as a cultural and interpretive guideline, shaping audience perception beyond aesthetic considerations.

Overall, the findings confirm that scenography in theatrical adaptations can function as a coherent semiotic system that communicates narrative structure, character relationships, and thematic depth. By integrating denotative and connotative meanings through spatial and visual design, the scenography enhances audience engagement and critical reflection, underscoring its essential role in contemporary theatrical interpretation.

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