

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE CITY MEANING IN THREE  
PAINTINGS BY AGUNG TATO  
(SEMIOTICS APPROACH OF CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE')**

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**ABSTRACT**

*A painting is not just a meaningless manifestation of human artistic creation. A painting is also a manifestation of a meaningful sign created by a painter. This article focuses its study on the meaning of the city that is represented in three paintings by Agung Tato entitled Second Level, City of Tomorrow, and B.....The theory that it is used to reveal the meaning of the three paintings by Agung Tato is Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics theory. The method which used in this study is an interpretive qualitative method. The interpretation factor of the sign which the basis of the analysis work is the factor that leads the choice of this method in this article. Based on the analysis that has been done, it was found that in Agung Tato's painting of the city is interpreted as an inhumane geography. Human is no longer as a subject who becomes central to the development or growth of a city. The city exists as a city itself, apart from the various living things in the universe.*

**Key words:** *Painting, Sign, Meaning, City*

**PREFACE**

A painting is not just a meaningless manifestation of human artistic creation. Painting is a medium of expression articulation of an artist to others. Painting or an artwork is a medium of communication between an artist and people.

As a medium of communication, painting contains meaningful messages. A painter in his creation is not in condition of a communication vacuum. There is always certain purposes that a painter wants to articulate to the public through the painting which he creates. Hence a painting is not only enjoyed by its aesthetic aspect, but

also it is enjoyed as a manifestation of a meaningful sign.

This article focuses on the meaning of the city as it is represented in three paintings by Agung Tato entitled *Second Level*, *City of Tomorrow*, and *B...*. The chosen three paintings create by Agung Tato as the object of study in this article is due to the power of city visualization in the three paintings themselves. In addition, Agung Tato's reputation as an artist is considered important in East Java. Agung Tato is an artist from Surabaya. In 2010, Agung Tato received an award from the Governor of East Java as an outstanding artist in the field of Fine Arts (<http://kominfo.jatimprov.go.id/read/umum/24753>). This reputation also becomes a factor in choosing the three Agung Tato's paintings as the object of study in this article.

The formal object that it is used as a theoretical basis for studying material object in this article is the semiotics theory of Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Pierce (in Vera, 2014) semiotics is the science or study of sign and everything related to sign. Semiotics

includes the study of how sign function, the relationship of sign with other signs, sending and receiving sign by its user.

**Sign** is not a kind of phenomenon as well as other non-semiotic objects. It means that the entire universe is full of signs and it is composed of signs (Pierce in Noth, 2006). Sign makes everything that exists in the universe can be interpreted and understood by human. A sign is a representative that explains something. The sign points to a person that creates in the mind of the person of an equivalent sign or more developed sign, the sign is created which is called the interpretant of the first sign. The sign indicates something, namely the object. (Pierce in Vera, 2014).

As a representative of something, a sign has function to show something. This means that sign makes someone understand something in his or her environment. It is stated by Vera (2014) as follows: "sign cannot express something, sign only has function to show, it is the interpreter who interprets based on their respective experiences."

Pierce's semiotics is a **triadic** sign science. This is because the existence of a sign that is understood by Pierce as something composed of three elements, namely representamen, object, and interpretant. These three elements compose the sign. Pierce's triadic model is often referred to as "*triangle meaning semiotics*" or it is known as the triangle theory of meaning.

The triadic model of sign in Pierce's first semiotics theory is Representament. **Representament** is a sign element that represents something (Zaimar, 2008). According to Pierce (in Noth, 2006) representamen is a term used to refer to "object that can be felt" which has function as a sign. The role of representamen conveys to someone's mind about something from a sign of something else (Noth, 2006).

**Object** is the second term in the triadic model of Pierce's sign. An object is something that is represented (Zaimar, 2008). For Pierce (in Noth, 2006) an object is something that is represented by a sign. Without object a sign cannot represent something. Without the

sign, the object will not be understood.

The third sign element in Pierce's triadic sign model is interpretant. **Interpretant** is a product that is produced by the relationship, or relationship development between the representamen and the object (Vera, 2014). The interpretant is a sign that is capture in the mind of the recipient after seeing the representament (Zaimar, 2008). The interpretant is the result of the interpretation of someone who receives the representament (Noth, 2006).

## METHODOLOGY

The method used as the basis of analysis in this study is interpretive qualitative. The choice of this research type is due to the qualitative data which is obtained in this study trying to be interpreted so that the meaning can be found (Denzin and Lincoln, 2009: 2-3). The object of this research is three paintings by Agung Tato namely; *Second Level*, *City of Tommorow*, and *B....* The primary data used in this study is meaningful visual data that is contained in three paintings by

Agung Tato namely; *Second Level*, *City of Tommorrow*, and *B....* The secondary data used in the study is obtained through literature and documentation study technique. Data analysis technique by means of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusion, which is based on the step of analysis of the level of sign containing in the semiotics theory of Charles Sanders Peirce

## DISCUSSION


### Semiotics Analysis C.S. Peirce of Three Paintings by Agung Tato

In doing semiotics analysis of the C.S. Peirce, the analysis involves of the representament, object, and interpretant. This is due to the understanding of the theory of Semiotics model C.S. Peirce which understanding the sign is composed of these three elements. Thus, the effort to find the meaning of the sign cannot be done without analyzing the three elements that forms the sign.

In this subsection, semiotics analysis of the object of study is presented. There are three paintings by Agung Tato which are analyzed in this subsection. The titles of the three paintings are: *Second Level*, *City of Tommorrow*, and *B....*

*Second Level* is a painting created by Agung Tato in 2013. The painting has 200 x 150 cm size that is made on canvas, using oil and karkoal paints. In semiosis, the painting depicts the city as an area that has lost its human value. It is shown in the following analysis table:

**Table 1.**  
**Semiosis Analysis of *Second Level* Painting by Agung Tato**

<b>Representament</b>
 <p style="font-size: small; text-align: center;">AGUNG TATO, second level, 150 cm X 200 cm, 2013, charcoal, cat minyak di kanvas</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Picture 1 Second Level Painting by Agung Tato Lukisan <i>Second Level</i> karya Agung Tato <a href="http://www.jakartaartawards.com/index.php?mib=lukisan.profile&amp;id=99">http://www.jakartaartawards.com/index.php?mib=lukisan.profile&amp;id=99</a></p>
<b>Object</b>
<p>The image of a city is full of buildings and it is seen from above. Besides seeing the overlapping roof</p>

of the building, there is also a wide road. The image of the city is in black and white.
<b>Interpretant</b>
A crowded city with buildings that are close to each other, and it is not comfortable for human life. The number of buildings that close each other making people feel uncomfortable to live in them. Therefore, in the painting, not a single human figure that it can be seen in the midst of close buildings and other structures in the city.

In the perspective of Sociology, the city can be understood as a human residential area. The city is a locus where humans develop themselves, doing social integration, and fulfill their needs in life. The city environment becomes a social space that it can fulfill humans need as social beings (Soekamto, 2013).


Nevertheless, city as well as society continue to develop. City experiences dynamic in its existence and function in human life. Capitalism and materialism that are increasingly massive in the live of

urban community has an impact on changing of the urban ecosystem.

In the condition and situation of capitalism and materialism, the city is reduced to only a physical material object. Capitalism is a postindustrial era. In that era, human consciousness is obeyed to the need for capital sustainability. Thus, human is no longer subject but object of production. Human is positioned as a consumer in that era.

This has an impact on the arrangement and formation of the human ecosystem. In the era of capitalism, the urban environment is built to provide space for physical objects that are not humanist. Therefore, in its development, the city no longer provides a friendly ecosystem for human and humanity. It is shown in the following table.

**Table 2**  
**Semiosis Analysis of *City of Tomorrow* Painting by Agung Tato**

<b>Representament</b>
 <p data-bbox="304 954 788 1133">           Picture 2            The painting of <i>City of Tomorrow</i> by Agung Tato  <a href="http://www.jakartaartawards.com/index.php?mib=lukisan.profile&amp;id=99">http://www.jakartaartawards.com/index.php?mib=lukisan.profile&amp;id=99</a>)         </p>
<b>Object</b>
<p data-bbox="300 1196 793 1503">           A brightly colored painting containing a structure image of a tall building is taken using an upside-down perspective or point of view, without a single human being can be seen in it.         </p>
<b>Interpretant</b>
<p data-bbox="300 1583 793 1944">           The sparkling of a city still leaves silence and isolation. No matter how transparent the existence of a city, it is still only a group of material that is far from human values. Thus, there is nothing that makes the city a comfortable place to live for human.         </p>

Although, the city presents a transparent panorama, but its existence in life still present silence for human.

Ecosystem that is not friendly to human life and humanity becoming the message of Agung Tato's paintings. Critically, Agung Tato understands and interprets the city as a beautiful space, but not humanness. Materiality and capitalism change the function of the city as a residential area that is friendly to human into a locus of physical object without humanity is the message that Agung Tato offers in his paintings.

In Agung Tato's painting B... the existence of the city as a locus that is inhumanity and humanity describing by the absence of human figure in the painting. It is shown in the following table.

**Table 3**  
**Semiosis Analysis of Painting *B ...***  
**by Agung Tato**

<b>Representament</b>
<div data-bbox="320 555 772 1003" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="309 1025 783 1205">           Picture 3            The painting of <i>B...</i> By Agung Tato            (Source:  <a href="http://www.jakartaartawards.com/index.php?mib=lukisan.profile&amp;id=99">http://www.jakartaartawards.com/index.php?mib=lukisan.profile&amp;id=99</a>)         </p>
<b>Object</b>
<p data-bbox="300 1326 791 1520">           A painting of an uninhabited city is filled with colorful buildings close together and congested present in an eagle's eye perspective.         </p>
<b>Interpretant</b>
<p data-bbox="300 1603 791 1962">           A city is silent geography and it doesn't have humanity value. Even though the city is built magnificently and beautifully filled with colorful buildings, but it is an area that is no longer comfortable for human and humanity values. Therefore, the city         </p>

looks majestic and beautiful, but there is no a single human live in it.

### Discussion

The city is no longer as a social space. It means the city which should has function as a domain where human interacts each other, it is no longer happened. This can be seen in the development of city that it does not count the human comfort anymore. Therefore, the definition of a city as a place for human, or a place where humans live and develop themselves, it is no longer valid.

Nowadays, the city is built for the city itself. The beauty consideration of the city is the main factor that underlies the development of the city. The humanist landscape places human as the subject of urban development has disappeared. So, it is not surprising that many cities come with a majestic and beautiful image, but they don't have a *sense of humanity*. Finally, the function of the city which is as the creator of the human social field and it is as a medium to fulfill human social need becoming disappears.

Agung Tato sees that the city is a space filled with buildings

without humans. The buildings are closely space forming a complex and intricate landscape. These buildings are in the city while humans are within the outer circle of the city domain. This can be seen in his painting entitled "*Second Level*".

*Second Level* is Agung Tato's painting which was created in 2013. In this painting, which was created using a combination of charcoal and oil paint on canvas, the city is shown with a gloomy and desolate image. The crowded composition filled with the figures of the building's roof overlapping each other, it is supported by the selection of a dark base color of the painting, and it makes the painting present with a composition that gives a gloomy impression. This is clarified by the absence of human in the painting.

The absence of human figure in the painting making the city seems a desolate area of life. In Tato's perspective, the city is an area that is not comfortable for life. The city is only a place for non-human material buildings. Tato's painting seems as a metaphor for the absence of humanity values.

The absence of these humanity values can also be seen in another painting by Agung Tato. As in his painting which is entitled *City of Tomorrow*. *City of Tomorrow* is a painting created by Agung Tato in 2010. Unlike *Second Level* which comes with a monochrome coloring model, *City of Tomorrow* comes with bright coloring and sharp lighting. The use of canvas and acrylic media make the painting looking so bright in coloring. However, the coloring still shows a strong sense of silence. Although it does not present with a gloomy impression, the silence in Agung Tato's painting looks so strong with the absence of human being in it.

Commonly, the city is understood as a place of residence with a relatively large population, limited area, generally non-agricultural, relatively high population, a place for a certain number of groups of people live in a certain geographical area, it tends to have a pattern of rational, economic, and individualistic. The definition still presupposes that the city is an area inhabited by humans. This is clearly different from the definition

of a city built in Agung Tato's painting.

In his painting entitled *City of Tomorrow*, the city is described as a colorful area but far from humanity values. This is clearly show in the absence of human figure or other living creatures in the painting, the city seems to be a place for others than living things. The city is an area that does not offer comfort to life. The iron figure that is spread in the composition of the painting, it seems to be marker related to the meaning of the city that has changed its identity to be an area where non-living things exist.

The iron figure is Tato's effort to build a symbolism referring to the meaning of materialism. In a capitalist society life as nowadays, the discourses of capitalism is something that must be accepted. The existence of humans with all their humanity is not something that needs to be considered. It is caused in the discourses of materialism, human is interpreted as material that has similarity with physical objects or objects that exist in nature. Hence the essential value of human with his/her

humanity is reduced to merely as the material content.

The same thing can be seen in the painting entitled *B...* by Agung Tato. The painting was created by Agung Tato in 2011. The use of acrylic and charcoal on canvas become the tools chosen by Agung Tato in creating the painting. Even though it is created with a coloring composition that eye-catching, the painting still shows Agung Tato's satirical character in interpreting the city. This is as seen in painting *B...* by Agung Tato.

The dominance of red in figures such as iron in Agung Tato's painting *B...* seems to give the impression of a life beat in the city. However, the life beat is not created by humans. The red color on the iron lengthen, they seem to look like the vein and nerve possessed by this creature. It looks to articulate that the life of the city is not created by the living things that are in it, but they are by the buildings that stand up. The vein and nerve of a city is building.

Generally, *B...* painting appears slightly different from the two previously discussed paintings.

In this painting, it does not appear silence, but still the life presented is life that does not presuppose the existence of living beings in it.

Human is no longer the subject that is central to the development or growth of a city. The city exists as a city itself, apart from the various living things that exist in the universe. In other words, it is represented as an inhumanity area by Agung Tato. The city is represented as a geographical locus that has no humanity value.

## CONCLUSION

Agung Tato's paintings entitled *Second Level*, *City of Tomorrow*, and *B....* represent the city as a geography that no longer has function as a space for human and humanity. In the three paintings, it appears that the city is represented only as an area that has a materialist ecosystem. Non-physical aspects are eliminated from the city. Therefore, the city is represented as a non-social and inhumanity area in the three paintings by Agung Tato.

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