

CONTEXTUALIZING ALAN CLARKE'S SHORT MOVIE 'ELEPHANT': THE HISTORICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The descriptive-qualitative paper purports an in-depth reading of the Trouble event depiction in Elephant movie by applying Greenblatt's theory of Historicism. Elephant movie contains only 16 murders in a repeated and exact manners with no context and dialogue other than a sentence in the opening movie. New Historicism is expected to explain why the movie presents in such a way by correlating one to each other; the movie and the history. The data would be collected through observation and analyzed with content analyses method. The symmetrical positioning of the literary work and the history explains (1) how the massive censorship of media and the extremely strict rule in Northern Ireland shaped the idea of producing Elephant with covert relation to either political party in conflict (2) the absence of people who was responsible of the conflict explains the vagueness of who killed and who was killed, and (3) the erasure of characterization of the characters coincide with the cluelessness of who was the real victim.

Keywords: sectarian violence, elephant, alan clarke, the troubles, historical approach

1. INTRODUCTION

The Troubles conflict is one of the most complex conflicts in the world and it has been over for about thirty-one years occurred in the entire Northern Ireland. However, the conflict is more than about two religion in conflict; protestant and catholic. The Troubles was initially about a conflict of land;

between settlers and natives. In the past year, there was a settlement by the British government who transferred English and Scotland people and they were mostly protestant. This settlement slowly revealed the real purpose of British to overtake the land they were struggled to take. Then, later initiation of

union of both parties was attempted and the release of order by Ireland and British government could not satisfy and bring peace for each party. As a result, the conflict ignited from 1960s to 1998s which ended with Good Friday Agreement. This three-decades of conflict was devastating and taken many lives which was fortunately documented when media reports were difficult to do.

Unfortunately, there are less movies who depicted overtly of the Trouble, but *Elephant* remains the most significant movie referring to the Trouble despite having no context, characterization, and dialogue. *Elephant* is a 36-minutes short movie directed by Alan Clarke, an important British filmmaker. On the contrary, his nationality contrasts with the theme and nation he wanted to tell and such shaped the movie's content through an understanding of outsider of the Troubles. In a time when a great effort to censor contents related to the Troubles, *Elephant* becomes the most distinctive storytelling and is significant for the audience. *Elephant* opens up with an infamous sentence referring the trouble as an elephant which no one seemed addressed this. Then, the movie proceeds to display 16 murders which audience could impossibly recognize who killed and who was the victim. Besides, the context of the perpetrator and the victim is none intentionally. Nevertheless, the movie consistently displays the murder in a certain and exact manner with different face of shooters.

In revealing the historical and/or cultural aspects of *Elephant*, researchers could apply new historicism, but not historical approach. Taine (1987), a French critic, theorized this traditional approach in which historical-biographical

appears. The approach attempts only to criticize and interpret literary works based on three important keys; race, milieu and moment. The keys could provide the zeitgeist and author's view produced in the literary work and both landscapes could also verify the historical depiction of the work. Historical approach is still relevant in terms of verifying and describing textually of the historical side of the work. For instance, the history of Hiroshima in John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (Henra & Jusmaya, 2019).

However, historical approach cannot be applied in order to contextualize *Elephant* because historical approach failed to recognize the complexity nature of the history (Tyson, 2015). History tended to be one-sided because they tended to represent one perspective and it is uncomplex because such interpretation presumed all history as clear and certain as fact of the event in a linearly told. In other words, historical approach represses for any other interpretation beyond that. For instance, it is difficult to contribute the victim's perspective in interpreting the history of Hiroshima of the novel. He also elaborates three characteristics of historical analysis; (1) any historical analysis cannot be objective in which the result influenced inevitably by the authors upbringing and view, (2) a particular historical analysis cannot represent generally of the era, and (3) history, similarly with real life, is not linear or even progressive. New Historicism recognizes the complexity nature of the history and it treats literary work and history the same as they share insights to each other.

There are recent studies which implement New Historicism theory. First, Taufiqurrohman (2019) applies New

Historicism to unpack the image of communist and position it horizontally to the Post-Suharto 1965 narratives such as *Penjagal Itu Telah Mati*. Second, Wicaksono (2018) applies New Historicism to interpret the social and political reality of Indonesia within *Larasati* novel. Third, Zulaemy and Andalas (2020) applies New Historicism to illustrate the historical dimension of *Penari dari Serdang* novel and how it affected in the creation of the novel.

Finally, the research elaborates the problems, the objectives and the significant of this initiation. The research identified a problem in Elephant short movie; the absence of context and the landscape repeated murder. The question would concern on how the history shaped such presentation. Accordingly, the research possesses objectives to explain the absence of context in the movie by reading the history with New Historicism. As a result, the analysis could provide a reference and explanation in interpreting Elephant and the Troubles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

New historicism provides the alternative lens to look at history the way as it should. It does not question the accuracy based only the author's life and how it was in the past generally. Based on the practice of Greenblatt, in which New Historicism was theorized, New Historicism views history as the interactive relation between the literary works and the culture of the era (Tyson, 2015). It means that the literary works produced how the reader view the culture. Moreover, the culture also produced the view perceived in the literary work. This interactive relation is the interesting part of viewing the history.

New Historicism considers the socio-economic aspects of the literary works by positioning secondary sources as co-text with the primary sources. Such does not appear in historical approach which treats the secondary approach as the evidence and cannot be treated critically as done in the literary works. Therefore, it can be said that New Historicism is an intertextual analysis by positioning primary and secondary sources horizontally (barry).

New Historicism is actually an insufficiently theorized because in the first place, it was just an interpretation practice. However, later, many critics and researcher demand in theorizing the practice for the result of viewing better of history. Then, Greenblatt published the Practicing New Historicism. There are five concept keys of New Historicism; (1) History is about an interpretation, not facts, and therefore, secondary sources can be analyzed similarly with literary works, (2) history should not be seen as linear and progressive narrative, (3) history is constructed by the power through exchanging goods, human beings, and ideas, (4) Historical analysis inevitably only focuses on particular discourse, and (5) personal identity is the result of the culture and so otherwise.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research conducts a descriptive qualitative which accord to the research object and theoretical approach. It accords to the research object, which is movie, because the method provides a tool for describing the events portrayed within 'Elephant' movie. Moreover, descriptive qualitative method obliterates the obstruction of the movie possessing no plot, and no conversation by describing the events meticulously. Since the theoretical

approach is new historicism which furthers the attempt of in-depth interpretation of the literary work, descriptive qualitative is the appropriate endeavor to analyze primary and secondary sources in a narrative culmination. In sum, the researcher uses descriptive qualitative method to describe the events within the movie, and the description is analyzed and presented in narrative analysis.

In collecting the data, the researcher adopts the non-participative observation. In analyzing the data, the researcher adopts Creswell (2018) technique according to the necessities of the research. There are five keys of analysis; (1) the researcher organizes and prepares the collected data sources to be analyzed. (2) the researcher positions the collected data sources in comparison to question and reflect and seek the interactive relation between the sources, then, (3) the researcher codes or marks every relation found in the data sources (4) and generates every relation found based on themes. Lastly, (5) the researcher re-analyzes and elaborates more of the previous findings based on the theme it is marked.

4. DISCUSSION

4. 1. The Troubles as the 'Elephant'

The movie opens the minute with a statement that provides the only context referring to the era of the time.

"For some of us, 'The Troubles' is the elephant in our living room."
(Clarke, 1989: 00:03)

'The elephant in our living room' is a common catchphrase referring to the ignored overt issue and the phrase provides an insight of how The Troubles was perceived by the journalistic media. Many newspapers of the time avoid discussing of The Troubles because they

would be prisoned. Especially, there was a persistent and continuous attempt to doctrine through broadcasting Margaret Thatcher's concern of Political Violence of Northern Ireland. The speech was broadcasted as a doctrine to hold everybody in their place. The speech told the indifference between crime violence and violence to make the political statement was heard by the above. Such took accountability of anyone who wanted to try to deviate the union of Ireland and British.

"The elephant in our living room" means that The Trouble was the talk of everywhere. They could not avoid of the fact that this terrible event occurred and Ireland was in deterioration while British Government cleaned their hands.

"The elephant in our living room" correlates with a journal that analyze how four newspaper perceived The Troubles. It provides an insight of the era that media had failed and avoid the terribleness of the violence and how it effected many sections of Ireland.

4. 2. The Reality of Sectarian Violence

After the opening statements which portrayed the situation simply of The Troubles, the movie proceeds with 18 sections of killings. Each section is similar in terms of the chronological events. It begins with the wide shot camera follows the murderer in his steps before killing the target and the camera stagnantly provides 20 seconds of the victim lying in their blood. There is no dialogue, no further context, and no characterization, but just a crude and cold look of the killing in The Trouble.

The Trouble, as David (2012) described in his book of *Making Sense of the Troubles*, sparked a sectarian

violence between the Protestants (Northern Ireland) and Catholics (southern Ireland). However, Elephant produced a different narrative than that. Elephant challenged the idea that the effect of sectarian violence had never been between the two clearly because the murderer and the victim of the killing was never be perceived clearly who killed who. The movie blatantly provides a landscape where none of the murderer or the victim can be determined whether they are Protestants or Catholics.

4. 3. The Absence of Higher Power

The movie does not provide the background information neither of the murderer and of the victim. Most interestingly, there is absence of the people who were actually in conflict; the people of IRA, UDA, and British Governments. Elephant produced this narrative is very much affected by the fact that newspaper never shaped the man in suit who involved in the conflict as the one who should be taking the responsible. Many of the reports of the killing was perpetrated by the member, not the people on the board. Therefore, Elephants portrayed the senseless killing as a reflection that does not recognize the people who killed, but also the people on the three organization who were actually in conflict.

4. 4. Unrecognizable Shooters And Victims

The 20 seconds of victim portrayal provides a reflection to the effect of political violence in The Trouble. It draws how the devastating event only resulted many victims which could not differ whether the target was correct or not. In *Lost Lives* book which contains journalistic stories of the victim (McKittrick et al., 2004), provides an insight of how the victim stories was in a terrible handle of Ireland government.

Many of the stories in that time were left inconclusive or unresolved. The book attempted to resolve and found that many of the victim too were the incorrect target of the murder. These victims were an ordinary civilian who lived as usual.

5. CONCLUSION

New Historicism reveals the atrocities of The Troubles. It reveals how the reality of Sectarian Violence was perceived and Elephant challenged the idea of providing a blatant and truthful landscape of the Troubles. The events only effected terrible in anywhere. It did not recognize the religion stance of the murderer or the victim. This event was actually conflicted within the board but included the member to do the senseless killings. Elephant provides a lens of how IRA, UDA, and British Governments' absence in the movie as the one who should responsible of the movie.

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