

# A SYMBOLIC REALITY OF AMERICAN TELEVISION: A CASE STUDY OF *THE JERRY SPRINGER SHOW*

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## ABSTRAK

*The Jerry Springer Show* adalah salah satu program *talk show* televisi Amerika yang dapat dikategorikan sebagai tabloid *talk show*, *trash talk show*, atau istilah lain yang menunjukkan betapa acara ini menyajikan topik persoalan yang vulgar. Meskipun acara ini adalah acara yang banyak dianggap orang tidak layak ditonton, ini masih tetap diminati di Amerika terbukti masih berlangsung dan telah menyajikan lebih dari 3.000 episode. Ternyata acara ini tidak hanya diminati oleh orang Amerika, tetapi juga oleh orang Inggris karena acara ini pun sampai mengilhami pembuatan opera yang dipentaskan di beberapa teater Inggris.

Ada tiga realitas yang sebetulnya merupakan simbolisasi yang dapat dimaknai di sini. Pertama, bermoral tidaknya suatu acara tidaklah menentukan minat orang dalam menonton tayangan televisi karena berhasil tidaknya suatu acara dalam masyarakat tergantung dari kekuatan sosial acara tersebut. Kedua, makin tinggi nilai kebebasan suatu masyarakat, makin tinggi pula tuntutan masyarakat terhadap pemenuhan kepuasan penonton televisi. Ketiga, karya imajiner yang ditayangkan di televisi akan dianggap sebagai suatu kebenaran apabila dikemas dalam program yang diterima dalam masyarakat sebagai program informasi dan bukan hiburan meskipun kandungan di dalamnya adalah hiburan.

Kata Kunci: simbol, populer, industri, pertunjukan televisi

## INTRODUCTION

The development of Indonesian television, particularly private televisions, nowadays triggers the emergence of many disappointments resulting from strong assumption of their bad impacts on the people. A proposal on pornography regulation then appeared and this brings controversy on its effectivity for keeping people in the right direction. There is no longer idea, as used to be, that television functions to keep traditional life on its right track, leading to the same points of national cultural grand design. In other words, by television we can no longer define our national life in accordance with the cultural grand design called national culture. Thus, it is clear that Indonesian television culture today has deviated from its traditional ideal role of a mass media functioning as an integration of education,

social control, and entertainment. The mode of production of television today is more economic deterministic than social deterministic. Only within this context, therefore, we can discuss the American television in its role in producing and transforming meaning.

American television today appears to be a media of not more than information and entertainment. This can be seen from its programs. In a macro spectrum, this is a logic consequence of the involvement of numerous components that then becomes an integrated part of television system both organisationally and institutionally. Private television is identical with huge capital mobilisation, the use of high-tech, and is managed by professionals. However, it largely serves the consumer's taste and depends on the advertisers. It is because

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of this function that television is worth investigated. Starting with a question: What and why does a television program like *The Jerry Springer Show*, a talk show which the writer believes to be the worst talk show that has ever been performed, can make meaning? Since there are a lot of television stations in The United States air this show, does this mean that the kind of life presented in the talk show represents the real Americans life. If that is so, what kind of awful life that Americans live today?

Richard Hoggart claims: "first, without appreciating good literature no one will really understand the nature of society; second literary critical analysis can be applied to certain social phenomena other than 'academically respectable' literature ... so as to illuminate their meaning for individuals and for their societies" (1966:277-278). Hoggart statement above offers a potency of any popular production, including *the Jerry Springer Show*, to be investigated. Bigsby (1976:4) proposes the same:

Since art and technology are assumed to be in opposite camps, popular culture, the child of technology, has frequently been seen as a symbol of a new brutalism. To those convinced of the vital centrality of traditional culture, popular culture is, by analogy, granted an equal though opposite potency (Bigsby, 1976:4)

## THE JERRY SPRINGER SHOW

*The Jerry Springer Show* is a television talk show hosted by Jerry Springer, which was first aired in the United States in the late 1991. Up to 2006, this show has more than three thousands episodes aired in many television stations although it was no longer aired in NBC Universal, initiating the production. There is no evidence why it is no longer aired in NBC. Is it because of its vulgarity that NBC, one of the major stations in the US like ABC, CBS, PBS, and FOX, does not want to air it?

*The Jerry Springer Show* is superficially a talk show where troubled spouse come to discuss their problems before a studio audience so that the audience or host can offer

suggestions on what can be done to resolve their situations. When people did not see this show by themselves they cannot believe its vulgarity. The topic of each episode usually involves sex, racism, marital jealousy. Typical topics of discussion on the show include unusual extra-marital affairs, brutal rivalries between couples, rebellious and promiscuous teenagers, strippers and adult movie stars, and the like. It is because of its topics and the way this show is presented it can be called Tabloid Television Talk Show which connotes cheap or bad talk show.

Some websites commenting about the show always use question marks in using the word "discussion" when they refer to the discussion carried out in the show. This seems to show they undermine this kind of show and regard the discussion in the show is not like what is called by discussion because of its brutality. Unlike any other talk show, The "discussion" of each episode usually involves shouting verbally with rude words, throwing anything, even throwing chairs. By using disgusting outfit, the guests on the stage can even fight. The audience in the studio also shout by the same manners. They sometimes even throw something to the guest. They are then trading insult throughout the length of the episode. This show was once voted as the "Worst TV Show Ever" (TV Guide.com). It was even symbolized as the so called "trash TV" talk show.

## THE JERRY SPRINGER SHOW IN ITS SYMBOLIC REALITY

Jacques Lacan (1972:40) announced in opening his seminar on Poe's "Purloined Letter":

We have decided to illustrate for you today the truth which may be drawn from that moment in Freud's thought under study—namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating in a story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of the signifier

In a similar fashion, this paper is intended to use Jerry Springer Show to illustrate the show's meaning within American culture. Lacan's theory above, therefore, offers insights which guide this article's interpretation.

Problems concerning taste and demand, however, is still debatable. Does television, as an industry that is completely marked by market mechanism, produce its programs on the ground of consumer's taste and demand, in this case, the viewers? Or what is really happening is just the opposite. It is television that determines the consumer's taste and demand. There is always an interdependence of interest among television and the viewer. When the programme makers come to mediate between *The Jerry Springer Show* and the audience, the following codes explained below becomes operative.

For about a century, Western Culture has been divided into two cultures, the traditional type of "high culture" and a "mass or pop culture". High culture is the arts that require some form of intellect to comprehend, therefore can only reach a small amount of population. Popular culture, on the other hand, is manufactured wholesale for the market. Television can, therefore, be called a product of popular culture as it is intended to reach and to be produced for general mass audience. This is the reason why *The Jerry Springer Show* is aired. Although condemned and regarded as the worst show *The Jerry Springer Show* is still on. It has even already a contract until 2008 (Freeman, 2005). No matter what people say the show goes on.

It can be clearly seen from the number of episodes produced, the show is an industry that lives in a market mechanism. At this point, the market mechanism demands show that television programs should stress on entertainment. All television shows have to be packed as entertainment since the market wants so. What is meant by market here are the viewer or audience and advertisers. The logic, then, goes like in the following, If *The Jerry Springer Show* succeeds in giving

programs that can cope with market demand, advertisers will be eager to advertise their products. Whatever the program, as long as it can attract many viewers, will also attract many advertisers. It is the answer why the contract of *The Jerry Springer Show* still continues. The program managers or even the owners of television stations airing the show should not have felt embarrassed by airing the show. That is all about business. This is the same with when Indosiar still aired the longest and worst, in the writer's opinion, soap opera *Tersanjung*. Although it does not mean that the television when a soap opera like *Tersanjung* (Indosiar) or *Mengapa Harus Inul* (SCTV), is backed by many product advertising, it does not mean that those advertisers and the people behind their production support the idea of feminism or struggle of the marginal people, but because the program can invite many viewers.

It is because of its promising profit that leads the show to be made into a musical play called *Jerry Springer—The Opera*. The surprising thing about the opera is that it is not made and performed in the United States. It is made and performed by Englishmen and in United Kingdom. Based on the television show *The Jerry Springer Show—The Opera* is written by Steward Lee and Richard Thomas. It performed at the Battersea Arts Centre in August 2001 and ran for a week, and sold out. When the show returned to the centre in February 2002 and the three-week run sold out in advance. It was, later on, performed in several theatres like in National Theatre which experienced a major success. All the tickets for the first run in this theatre were sold a week before the first performance. It was then shown in Edinburgh Festivals and Cambridge Theatre. The opera was also scheduled to be performed in 9 theatres in an event called UK Tour 2006 but cancelled due to some protests from the society.

The violence and impropriety of the show certainly brings about controversy. The most disagreement comes especially from religious

institutions. The recorded protests, for example, go to *The Jerry Springer-The Opera*, as in the statement of Stephen Green, national director of Christian Voice, who said: "I find it astonishing that Mark Thompson [BBC Director General] and David Soul [the show's star] claim they are Christians and they can see nothing wrong with Jerry Springer - The Opera". Other criticisms also says: "what kind of Christians are the sort of people who find mocking God and Jesus Christ acceptable?" and "if this show portrayed Mohammed or Vishnu as homosexual, ridiculous and ineffectual, it would never have seen the light of day." (BBC News, 2005).

Despite controversy the opera brought, especially when it was broadcast on BBC Two, UK, the opera still went on. BBC news announced that *Jerry Springer – The Opera* brought about 55,000 complaints prior to screening, and 8,000 more after it had been put on air (Freeman, 2005). Those does not stop people for not watching it although it was cancelled to be performed in Broadway. This shows how mass culture work in society and it is even stronger in industrial, capitalist, and democratic society. As long as money and backing involved, any performance can run. It means that there must be people who support the show. This is demonstrated, for example, by The National Secular Society defending the BBC's right to screen *The Jerry Springers-the Opera* urging "the BBC not to give in to 'religious bullies' " and "This organised attack is the latest of a series of attempts by religious interests to control what we can see or say in this country." (Freeman, 2005). Along with industrialisation, therefore, television is viewed as the creator of real life. Television brings about and spreads symbols of industrial society as Cassirer points out, the more modern the civilization is, the more intense man interact with symbolic world (Cassirer, 1979:156).

Television comes in such context. Television step forward to fill mass culture with "soul", with symbols. It offers life style, images,

and also dreams that seem to be the needs of industrial urban society. City with its all dynamics is the grand setting in Indonesian television programs as well. Even when there is a program describing a rural life, the perspective is definitely urban. City is the parameter of progress and modernism as the money is all that counts. As an example, from how *The Jerry Springer Show* has experienced, it started as a politically - oriented talk show. Because it had a low rating, a new producers picked it up and changed to be a cheap and provocative show. Later on after more than a decade, the show in the form of an opera even gained awards like *Laurence Olivier Awards*, *Critics Circle Award*, and *Evening Standard Award*. Does that mean the American audience are mostly lowbrow? This is interesting to be discussed further.

Each episode of the show is loaded with exchanging verbal insults between the studio audience and the featured guests on the show. It can be assumed that such exhibition is intended to arouse the audience feeling of being better than those people in the show although Springer wraps up each show with a moralizing sermon on the subject entitled "Jerry's Final Thought," often finishing his speech with "Take care of yourselves and each other." This certainly invite laughter to the audience in the studio, which more or less the same with television audience. The laughter and disgust are produced just like when humour is performed. This fact brings about a justification as described in the following. First, the show signifies that the enjoyment comes from superiority feeling that the audience might have. This is seen from the way the audience react in the studio. They express their disgust and contempt in various way, from frowning their eyes, shouting, scorning to throwing their belonging to the "bad guy" in the show. All of these seem to show that the audience find enjoyment in being superior to the people performed in the show. As if the audience feel that they are less stupid, less ugly, less unfortunate than those people performed in the show.

Those kinds of reactions can only be expressed in a free country like in the United States where people feel free to express their feelings in anyway as long as they do not harm others. This is also shown in reality. As result of the show, there is a game invented by David Levy (The Webtender.com) called "The Jerry Springer Drinking Game." It is practiced among drinkers with the rules as follows:

1. Anytime you have had the problem the show is dealing with, chug a beer. (Done only once at beginning of show.)
2. Whenever there is a beep (censored), take a shot of beer.
3. When there's a fight, take a shot of beer, last person to slam down glass takes another shot.
4. Whenever a person gets into another fight drink the number of fights they have been in.
5. Whenever they show free tickets screen, last person to put their thumb on the table takes a shot of beer.
6. Whenever someone says the title of the show (i.e. "I'm Cheating On You") take a shot of beer.
7. During the final thought, whenever you are confused, take a shot of beer. Be honest.
8. Whenever a guest comes out with a prop (i.e. flowers) take a shot of beer.
9. Whenever the prop is used in a fight, take a shot of beer.
10. Whenever they go to commercial break, last person to sink quarter in center cup takes 2 shots.
11. Whenever the chair person fixes the chairs, everyone stands on their chair and screams, "I Love Jerry."
12. Whenever Jerry makes fun of a guest, play musical chairs. Must go more than one seat away. Last person seated takes a shot.
13. Whenever you see a bouncer wearing a pink shirt, pat your head and rub your tummy.
14. Anytime an audience member tries to solve the problem, take a shot of beer.
15. If someone's wig falls off, everyone checks to make sure they still have their hair.
16. During the credits, if someone has a prepared rap/skit, last person to take a shot of beer has to repeat what was said.

Studying those rules we, especially for moslems who regard alcoholic drink is *haram*, may feel disgusted. This is actually a sign of a free America. Sensitive areas where the activities of the broadcasting bring them into contact with the dominant forces in ideological groups, political parties, or religious organization are negated although many individuals in the US believe television is actually harmful to society.

When the first television was invented in the United States in 1929, it was celebrated. People used it not only for entertainment, communication, recreation, but also for education. The show's overwhelming depiction of sex and how sex is portrayed, however, leads us think that the world is being transformed into an entertainment reality. Although many individuals realize that television is not real, and they understand how to comprehend the difference between reality and fiction, the brutality of the performance and the reaction of the society show reality rather than fiction.

The codes of celebrating freedom can also be demonstrated when we analyze the show in comparison with popular programs which is unversally accepted as a presentation inviting laughter. Those are humours, comedy, or jokes. In Indonesia, for example, this kind of presentation is made itu various forms. It can be in the form of traditional Wayang Wong to the recent program like *Extravaganca* of Trans TV station. Learning from what comedy or humour present, the writer found out that the two kinds of programs are one way or another similar. Both of them arouse laughter despite their differences in nature. In arousing humour, there is a theory that is called incongruity, saying that humour arises from disjointed, ill suited pairings of ideas or situation which move away from the common custom. This is

exhibited by Rubin investigating the basic American humorous situation (Rubin, 1977:8-13). Compared by Rubin's investigation, this show creates the same purpose. For an analogy, the comedy shows on Indonesian televisions performing Gogon with a little hair left in front, Jojon with his strange costume, and Bolot with his bizarre stupidity shows the incongruity. This concerns with the second symbols representing freedom.

All those incongruities presented in *The Jerry Springer Show* certainly invite laughter and often repugnance. When compared with the performance of incongruity in Indonesian television, *The Jerry Springer Show* produces a far more expressive reaction. This can be seen not only in the brutality of the show but also in the reaction of the audience in the studio. This signifies that American society demands higher intensity in the expression of their freedom and individualism. This argument may bring about an idea that in liberal country where the expression of freedom can be accommodated in any way as long as they do not harm other people, the level of expression is getting stronger and stronger. There is no limit on this. This may be the result of many protests among society, especially, religious organization as well as many support.

Pro and against are obvious. Since society is varied, there must be groups that want to stand in the middle. This can be seen from the comment of Kim Evans, Executive Director of Arts at Arts Council England, on *The Jerry Springer—The Opera*:

We believe that part of the role of the arts is to generate debate and discussion around sometimes controversial issues. Arts Council England supported the development of the original production of *Jerry Springer -The Opera* and we are proud to be associated with it. Our decision not to put funds into the tour has nothing to do with pressure from extremist groups. We took the unusual step of considering a grant application from Avalon, a commercial producer, precisely because we believe that *Jerry Springer -The Opera* should be seen outside London. ...We are delighted that more people will have the opportunity to see the show and take part in the debate." (2005)

## ENCODING REALITY

Seeing the show, audience can mistakenly regard this show is genuine. It means the guests in the show are really those who experience what is presented in the show. For example, the fight over a girlfriend is really a fight. People sometimes can no longer separate reality with imaginary. In 1999, for example, the Chicago City Council suggested that if the fist fights and chair-throwing in the show were real, then the guests should be arrested for committing acts of violence in the city. This statement is actually stated as a result of the performance which looks real to the audience. When asked whether the fights were genuine, Springer said, "They look real to me." (BBC News, 2004) Actually the talk show is made up although its idea may come from real happenings. The question coming from that evidence is that what kind of elements that should be invented so as to create an authentic presentation?

Clifford Greetz defines culture as pattern of value in the form of symbols transmitted historically, a reference of world view that is constructed in symbols by which the society communicate, and improve their knowledge of life and their attitude toward the life itself (1973:89). In one hand, symbols are formed by dynamic in social relation that produces empirical reality, transmitted historically, and contains a set of values. On the other hand, those symbols provide reference concerning the way man perceives and lives his life, and functions as a media and representation of social reality.

The production of culture and meaning in television is a symbol. Television produces and transmits reality, social reality, in the form of symbols. In social life man also live in a symbolic environment. But in television symbol is more ultimate. Kuntowijoyo divides environment into three different locus. First, material environment deals with artificial matters such as house, bridge, field etc. Second, social environment that includes social organisations, social stratification,

socialisation, life style and so on. Third, symbolic environment that includes all aspects that govern meaning and communication such as words, language, myth, song, ceremony, art, behaviour, material objects, concepts, etc. (Kuntowidjoyo, 1987:66). Television brings about all those three environments in the form of symbols. In other words, in creating convincing imaginary presentation through symbols, people should encode social reality in such a way that the audience find the show convincing.

Analyzed from the reaction of the audience in the studio, comments from society, and what happened to the show as explained above, the show invent two ways in convincing audience and this is discussed in the following discussion.

Since symbols are presentation of empirical reality, they will shift when the empirical reality undergoes a change. At this point, culture is more a process than an end that always shifts and develops. Umar Kayam in Grijm and Robson (1986) defines culture as a process of dialectic efforts done by society to solve the problems and obstacles they encounter in This dialectic feature provides a continuum of culture. In accordance with the shift of culture in coping with the individual and society needs. S.I. Poeradisatra in Soeharto (1981) defines culture as a changing organism that responds human needs within the dimension of time and space. Thus, culture is organic. The function of culture is not merely as a preservation but also innovation, it fulfils the changing objective needs of a society. What stays in American culture people is the need of trustworthiness. This is actually not only Americans' need but also everybody's need. It is a universal need.

The development of advertisement in Indonesian television today shows it. The way in convincing the audience to the reliability of a product is through using ordinary man and woman, instead of beautiful actor and actress, to offer the product. The show meets such criteria in the form of a talk show which is generally believed to be a program presenting reality. *The Jerry Springer Show* is fabrication

but many people believed it as factual. The discussion held in the show can then be regarded as invented discussion although it looks like one. This misleading perception is the factor that makes the program successful.

Other powerful factor *The Jerry Springer Show* produces is its appealing to audience emotion. The show's effort in arousing the audience's emotions like anger, disgust, sympathy, pity, love, hatred, excitement, craze, irritation, outrage is supreme. The show tries to arouse the innate passion of human being into extreme although the show puts it in bad-mannered or coarse way. In the very beginning, disgusted feeling is aroused through the title of each episode, for example, "Daddy, will you marry me?" "Two Fat Men on a Pole," "Married with Children." We may think there is nothing in the title because there are also stories in high literature inventing the same titles but they are connotative rather than denotative. The show, instead, often invent titles having denotative meaning. In the episode "Daddy, will you marry me?", for example, there can be a father who lives with his daughter as husband and wife or a daughter who falls in love with her father and fight her own mother for gaining the father who can be ugly and disgusting.

Other efforts in appealing the audience's eyes is through the guests' disgusting appearance. The show can present a fight between two fat women fighting over a man. The women with strong makeup and minimum clothes can tear each other's clothes until they are nearly naked. In other episode there can be a big, fully tattooed, rough face man throwing his chair to his lover who is also a man because his lover falls in love with a woman. Such crazy view can certainly becomes an inviting factor of the show.

Sound produce is also important in arousing the audience's emotion. Shouting and cursing with rude words are common in the show. Interestingly enough, the audience in the studio also react the same. The sound produced can represent the violence in itself. It means, eventhough people do not see it on

the television and only listen to the radio they can be disgusted with the words and sounds produces as, for example, sound effects were added such as a fight bell and a cow mooing.

Those are the way how the show puts violence in the street in symbolic presentation in television. A conversion of a material, social, and symbolic environment occurs in order to convince the audience and with this convincing presentation the show can have power in inviting people to see. This brings to an opinion that television transforms daily life into media reality. Furthermore, television also defines who and what that should be on the screen. In Fiske's conception, television functions as "the *bearer/provoker of meaning and pleasures*" (Fiske, 1987:1). Technically, Fiske divides the process of the production and reproduction of reality into stages. The first stage is reality in the form of performance, fashion, make-up, environment, verbal behaviour, gesture, expression, voice, etc. The second stage is representation. Television employs cameras, lighting, editing process, music to produce a story in the form of narration, conflict, and action. The last stage is ideology. This refers to the organisation of ideological codes in coherent way that can be accepted by individualism, patriarchy, race, materialism, capitalism, and so on. These stages describe how a physical or empirical reality is transformed into symbolic reality. These are all demonstrated in *The Jerry Springer Show* in such a way that the show is reliably to be the real show.

## CONCLUSION

Media has its own reality that can be called as media reality. This is different significantly from empirical reality, though media reality is derived from empirical reality. Empirical reality in the form of fact has frame and totality. When an event is recorded by a camera, what actually captured are the pieces of a complete event. Camera takes one of the angles of the event that are regarded interesting according to certain criteria, and separates it from the whole

context of the actual event. These pieces are then edited, packed, and arranged in the form of new story that may be influenced by certain interest. The result is that the new story is frequently different in substance from the real story. Even though the television viewer or audience understand that *The Jerry Springer Show* is only a media reality, it is regarded as representing reality. As a result, it generates concerns to many people. Is that the world that we are all heading for?

It is a fact that viewer never becomes a passive party in perceiving a cultural phenomena. Meaning and values that are offered by presentation of the show like *The Jerry Springer Show* will never entirely accepted by viewer without reserve. In fact, viewer sometimes places those meanings in a context of actual condition where they live, modify them so that they in accordance with their will.. in this sense, viewer is an active party and the process of consuming a cultural phenomena. It is now up the us in what direction we are heading for. What happened in the United States like in the case of *The Jerry Springer Show* at least give us a warning of the strong future possibility of the presentation of symbolic reality in television.

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