The Interpretation of Wayang Characters in Cyberpunk-Styled Digital Art: A Case Study of Mr. Lakon's Artworks

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Abstract

Wayang, an Indonesian traditional puppet performance, represents a centuries-old tradition that has been passed down for generations. The extensive journey of *wayang* has resulted in the continuous transformation of *wayang* in its artistic aspects, form, and function. In recent years, digital art has emerged as a new form of artistic expression, and artists like Mr. Lakon have reinterpreted *wayang* characters in a cyberpunk aesthetic to create unique digital art pieces. This paper aims to examine Mr. Lakon's artworks and explore how he uses *wayang* characters and narratives to create new interpretations of *wayang*. The research methods used in this study include historical and content analysis. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the discourse on *wayang* preservation by demonstrating how traditional cultural elements can be interpreted in the digital era, as well as provide insights for artists who are interested in exploring traditional cultural elements in a contemporary context.

Keywords: *Wayang*, Digital Art, Cyberpunk, Interpretation

Introduction

Wayang is an Indonesian traditional performance that mostly uses puppetry as its medium. *Wayang* spread across Indonesia and even overseas with various variations, such as *wayang purwa*, *wayang bali*, *wayang siam*, and *wayang gedog* which are made of cow leather. There are also some *wayang* puppets made of wood, such as *wayang* golek and *wayang* klithik.

The spread of *wayang* in Indonesia is linked to the influence of Hinduism, which entered the island of Java, Indonesia, around the fifth century. Consequently, the majority of stories used in *wayang* performances are derived from Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* with adaptation to align with the socio-cultural values of the society. In a wider context, *wayang* is not only about the performance but also a narrative that is coming from the stories.

Until today, *wayang* still performed and adapted to changing times. Various interpretations and creative processes by puppeteers have resulted in various new types of *wayang* that differ from the traditional version.

Furthermore, in the modern era, some visual artists have an interest in interpreting and incorporating *wayang* elements into their artworks. *Wayang* is not only presented in performing arts, but also showcased in other visual art forms such as drawing, painting, digital art, and many more. For example, an Indonesian painter Hendra Gunawan interpreted a male *wayang* character from *Mahabharata* named Arjuna as a female figure who gave breastfeeding and incorporated that interpretation into his painting. A duo of visual artists called Indieguerillas also showcased *wayang* characters in their digital artwork "Jalan Gembira" with pop culture nuance.

Following the phenomenon of the interest in showcasing *wayang* elements in visual art forms, this study discusses an interpretation of *wayang* characters into cyberpunk digital art created by Mr. Lakon. This study aims to explain the interconnectedness between *wayang* as a traditional element and cyberpunk as a contemporary one by identifying Mr. Lakon's approach to utilizing *wayang* characters, narratives, and symbolism to generate interpretations of *wayang* in the contemporary context. Moreover, this paper underscores the significance of digital art as a novel medium in presenting *wayang*, providing valuable insights for visual artists seeking to engage with traditional cultural elements within a contemporary context.

Methodologies

Data analysis methods used in this research are historical and content analysis. The historical analysis aims to trace the transformation of *wayang* in every period, encompassing significant cultural shifts and evolving trends. This analysis involves a comprehensive examination of existing literature related to *wayang*. Meanwhile, the content analysis focuses on identifying characters, symbols, narratives, and connections between *wayang* and cyberpunk in Mr. Lakon's digital artworks. This method facilitates an in-depth examination of how traditional *wayang* characters undergo reinterpretation within the cyberpunk context.

The data collection procedures in this study involve selecting three representative samples of Mr. Lakon's digital artworks, each portraying distinct *wayang* characters. These samples are carefully chosen to provide a comprehensive analysis and diverse representation of the interconnectedness of *wayang* and cyberpunk. Additionally, an interview phase with Mr.

Lakon is conducted to garner valuable insights about his creative process that support the comprehensive analysis in this study.

Results and Discussion

I. The Transformation of *Wayang*

The journey of *wayang* is dynamic and constantly adapts to the changing culture and conditions. This results in transformations occurring in various aspects, including form, performance, and function. According to Mulyono (1989), the period of *wayang* is divided into two periods: prehistoric and historical period. In this paper, the historical periods is further divided into the Hindu period, Islamic period, colonial period, and modern period.
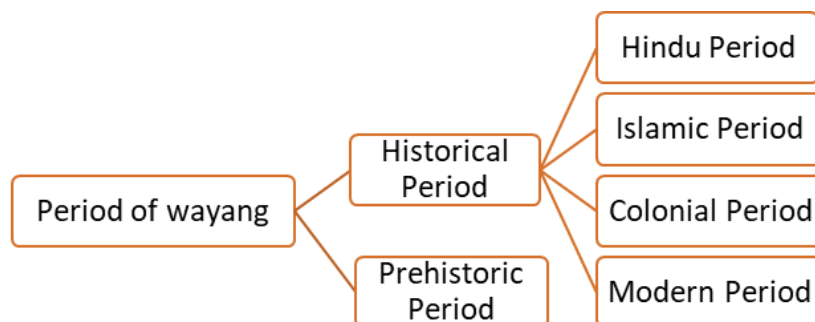
Figure 1. Period of *Wayang*

In the prehistoric period, *wayang* performance was part of the religious ritual of the ancient Javanese people who still adhered to animistic beliefs. According to Awalin (2018), based on historical traces of *wayang*, there are indications that *wayang* has existed since 1500 BCE. *Wayang*, in its original form with simple equipment, is confirmed to have originated in Indonesia and was created by the Indonesian people in Java (Mulyono, 1989). During that time, *wayang* was used as a medium to communicate with ancestral spirits or *hyang*. Some researchers like Dr. Hazeu agreed that the word "*wayang*" is derived from "hyang" which means ancestral spirits.

Wayang performance in ancient times was a shadow play. People carved pictures of their ancestors on animal skin and used light to create shadows of those. The belief in ancestral spirits inspired people to create *wayang* as shadow representations of their deceased ancestors. This is what constructs Prof. Kern's thought that the word "*wayang*" derived from "wadyong" (ancient Javanese) or "bayang" (Indonesian) which means shadow. However, the meaning of *wayang* as a shadow has changed the cultural shift in society. Guritno (1988) stated that *wayang* is no longer interpreted solely as a shadow, but rather as a stage performance or theater.

From 898 to 910, The Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were translated into some old Javanese literature with adaptations to align with the socio-cultural values of the society at that time. These works became a source of stories for *wayang* performance. One of the famous literary works that is used as a *wayang* story is *Kakawin Bharatayudha* written by Mpu Sedah and Mpu Panuluh. *Wayang* which originally drew from ancestral myths shifted to the adaptation of Hindu epics.

In the Hindu period, the function of *wayang* also changed to become a medium for Hinduism teachings. Then, *wayang* began to be interpreted as a stage performance or theater around the 10th century. As cited by Awalin (2018) *wayang* performances were shown and became an attraction for the audience. However, the essence of *wayang* performances still had a magical-religious nature.

In the 12th century, it is recorded that the first *wayang* kulit made of animal leather was created by Prabu Jayabaya, the King of Kediri Kingdom. Prabu Jayabaya created the leather puppet based on the reliefs of Panataran Temple, which depicted the journey of Rama in the *Ramayana* epic. The reliefs from the temple were then carved onto cow skin to create the *wayang* kulit puppet. The figures of the *wayang* based on the reliefs of Candi Panataran were in realistic form, the dimensions of humans are described according to their structure.

Figure 2. Panataran Temple Relief   **Figure 3**. "Naradda and Syiwa"

As the Islamic period began in Indonesia in the 15th century, *wayang* experienced a period of substantial transformation. Its function shifted from Hindu religious rituals to a medium to spread Islamic values, education, and communication (Suhardjono, 2016). Due to this shift, the story of *wayang* that is coming from the Hindu epic also adapted and modified to align with Islamic values. In addition, some *wayang* stories are also sourced from babad, an ancient Javanese literature based on historical events after the arrival of Islam in Indonesia.

The form of *wayang* which was originally shown as proportionally realistic depicted in the reliefs of Hindu temples, was changed to be more surreal, disproportionate, and imaginative. The puppet's neck and hands change to be longer, the body shaped is slender, and the face is sharper and smaller. The change in the form of *wayang* perhaps occurred because based on Islamic values, Muslims are prohibited from creating something that resembles the form of a human being (Sayid, 1981).

Figure 4. "King Rama". Flat leather *wayang* in Islamic Period

Moving to the colonial period, *wayang* performance still became a form of assertion of cultural identity amidst resistance to colonial domination. Despite the challenging social and political conditions, *wayang* performance also offered a space for social commentary and critique. The kings and regents used *wayang* as a symbolic tool to ignite the spirit of the people's struggle (Rianto, 2009). The repertoire of *wayang* stories expanded to include themes and narratives relevant to the social and political issues faced by local communities. *Wayang* performances also shifted from the royal courts to more public venues, such as open-air stages and village squares.

At the end of the colonial era, social and political changes gave rise to contemporary *wayang* that became known to the public in 1920 through the creation of *wayang* wahana by R.M. Sutanto Harjowahono ("*Wayang* Medium Seni Propaganda", 2019). The figures of early contemporary *wayang* often resemble realistically drawn human figures. The story no longer solely showcases stories involving gods, kings, or knights, but instead often depicted stories of common people in society.

Figure 5. *Wayang* Suluh, one of the early contemporary *wayang*

In the modern period, traditional *wayang* is still performed while contemporary *wayang* is increasingly evolving. Furthermore, puppeteers demonstrate their creativity by integrating traditional *wayang* elements with contemporary themes, thus establishing a meaningful connection between the preservation of *wayang* and its relevance in the present context. For example, in the performance of "The Theft of Sita", a collaboration between puppeteer I Made Sidia and director Nigel Jamieson, the performance fused elements of traditional *wayang* with the urban context. The characters were from the epic *Ramayana*, but the story revolves around city conflicts as the performance presented cityscape silhouettes.

Figure 6. "The Theft of Sita" performance

A highlight in the modern era is also the interest in integrating *wayang* elements into visual art among the artists. This often involves blending *wayang* aesthetics with other artistic styles. Hendra Gunawan, Indiguerillas, and other notable artists have proved that presenting *wayang* elements in contemporary works provides new interpretations and nuances to *wayang*.

The transformation of *wayang* that occurs in each period is also influenced by what its creators have seen, heard, and experienced. As stated by Awalin (2018) drawing on Herbert Read's theory, the unique form of *wayang* is a result of the creators' desire to capture nature in its most complete form.

II. *Wayang* Cyberpunk

The rise of digital technology has had a significant impact on the art world by offering new mediums for creative expression. In the visual art context, digital art has emerged as a new medium of creative expression using digital tools to draw, paint, and even make a model in 3D creation. It is a new kind of space where art is available to everyone and allows everyone to be an artist in their own right to express their preferences and feelings. In a broader view, digital art is a term applied to contemporary art, which uses the methods of mass production or digital media (Jevtić & Tomc, 2018).

Mr. Lakon, a digital artist from Indonesia, has harnessed the power of digital technology to create unique digital artworks that fuse the tradition of *wayang* with the futuristic aesthetics of the cyberpunk genre. Through his digital art pieces, Mr. Lakon takes the characters, stories, and symbols of *wayang* and presents them in visually striking artworks.

Mr. Lakon specifically interpreted *wayang* characters from *Kakawin Bharatayudha* stories, an old Javanese literature adapted from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* which focuses on telling

stories about a war scene namely the Bharatayudha war. Bharatayudha is a great war between two families descended from Bharata, the Pandawa and Kurawa. The war that was triggered by a power struggle, lasted for eighteen days.

Cyberpunk in this study is viewed as a visual culture phenomenon and genre that appears in every format, such as comics, movies, TV series, video games, and many more. It was started in the 1980s when notable movies were produced, such as Blade Runner (1892) and Akira (1988) which the manga version was published in 1982.

Cyberpunk is characterized by a distinct visual style that reflects a high-tech and dystopian future. Cyberpunk visuals often depict futuristic cityscapes filled with neon lights, towering skyscrapers, and other elements to create a bustling-vibrant which is a representation of late capitalism where almost every aspect of human life has become commercialized (Jørgensen et al, 2019). At the same time, cyberpunk visuals also convey the dark and gritty atmosphere of a dystopian society because of moral degradation, social decay, and an oppressive system as a potential consequence of late capitalism and transhumanism amid technological advancement. A high-tech future is also reflected by the concept that mind and body can be replaced by cyborgs, androids, virtual bodies, artificial intelligence, or something entirely different.

The correlation between *wayang* and cyberpunk might not be immediately evident due to their distinct cultural origins and historical contexts. However, a comprehensive examination of Mr. Lakon's artworks reveals an interconnection of *wayang*'s traditional elements and cyberpunk's futuristic context.

During an interview, Mr. Lakon revealed his early familiarity with *wayang* since childhood. As he grew older, he developed an interest in robots and the cyberpunk genre, which represents a contemporary artistic movement. Being part of the transitional generation, he considered himself fortunate to have experienced both traditional and contemporary contexts. Mr. Lakon observed how various ancient mythologies and folktales have been adapted and modernized in mediums such as comics and movies, citing Marvel characters like Hercules, Odysseus, Thor, and Amatsu-Mikaboshi as examples. This realization served as a source of inspiration for him to reinterpret *wayang* characters through the lens of cyberpunk.

Mr. Lakon also mentioned that the *wayang* stories are very ancient, and their original depictions remain unknown, along with the experiences of the writers at that time. Given the passage of centuries and the vastly different contemporary context, artists possess the freedom to interpret *wayang* stories in various forms and styles. This freedom of interpretation allows Mr. Lakon to create a novel art expression that represents *wayang* in cyberpunk digital art.

The first Mr. Lakon's artwork analyzed in this study is "End of Bharatayudha" which portrayed a battle scene of Bima and Duryudana. Bima was a member of the Pandawa family with extraordinary physical strength, while Duryudana was a skilled warrior from the Kurawa family. Mr. Lakon portrayed Bima as a giant human mutant holding a giant mace to represent that Bima has extraordinary physical strength. Duryudana is portrayed as a cyborg army armed with a deadly weapon that looks like a bazooka. The scene of Bima and Duryudana in Mr. Lakon's artwork is set against a background of a dark and gritty modern urban landscape so that the visual atmosphere of cyberpunk is significantly amplified.

In the Bharatayudha war, it is narrated that the characters have their divine weapons and mystical powers for combating each other. In relation to cyberpunk, divine weapons can be interpreted as hi-tech advanced weapons and mystical powers as the advancement of technology in genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and many more. Mr. Lakon himself said that when he created his artworks, he imagined the Bharatayudha war as a futuristic war involving advanced technology.


Figure 7. "End of Bharatayudha" (Mr. Lakon, 2021)

Figure 8. Bima and Duryudana in Bharatayudha war, a *wayang* performance
by puppeteer Ki Manteb Soedharsono (2013)

Another of Mr. Lakon's artwork analyzed in this study is "Ekalaya". Ekalaya is a talented archer who sought to learn from teacher Durna. Despite being rejected due to his low status, Ekalaya still has respect for Durna. He built a statue of Durna and practiced archery diligently, mastering the art on his own. Impressed by his skills and dedication, Durna eventually acknowledged Ekalaya's talent and praised him as a great archer. However, Durna asked Ekalaya to give his right thumb as a token of respect that is traditionally offered by students to their teachers (Solichin, et al, 2017).Ekalaya decided to cut his thumb off and give it to Durna. Since then, he could no longer shoot arrows with precision. As time went by, Ekalaya realized that he had been deceived by Durna who intentionally did not want him to become a skilled archer. When Ekalaya faced Arjuna, he was defeated and killed. Before his death, he swore that his spirit would never die until he took revenge on Durna. This oath proved to be true. During the Bharatayudha war, Ekalaya's spirit entered a warrior's body named Drestajumena, and through Drestajumena's body, Ekalaya killed Durna.
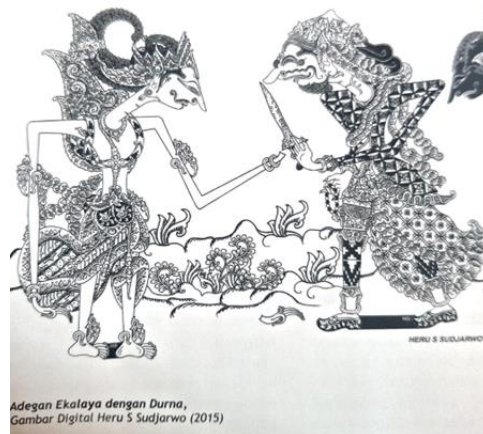
Figure 9. Ekalaya and Durna Scene (Heru S Sudjarwo, 2015)

Mr. Lakon depicted Ekalaya from a different perspective, diverging from the conventional depiction of the skilled archer with a severed right thumb. Instead, he reimagines Ekalaya as a cyborg equipped with four hands, a transformation that augments his archery proficiency. That interpretation is related to a manifestation of the scene when Ekalaya's spirit persevered after his body was dead, and his spirit entered Drestajumena's body. Mr. Lakon interpreted the occurrence of Ekalaya's metamorphosis into a cyborg as a strategic evolution to seek revenge against Durna in the Bharatayudha war.

That interpretation is related to the concept of techno-mediated embodiment in cyberpunk. For cyberpunk, embodiment deals with the question of whether mind and body can be separated from each other (Jørgensen et al, 2019). This embodiment resonance in science fiction movies such as "Transcendence" and the "Westworld: Riddle of the Sphinx" series, where the character's consciousness is digitally transferred into a computer matrix. Subsequently, the cloning of the character has been made and the character's consciousness was transplanted into the clone. This complex process represents the core ideas of embodiment which include disembodiment (disconnecting from the body) and reembodiment (reconnecting with the body). Ekalaya's story shares similarities with this concept. His spirit persists, transitioning into a new form, echoing the fundamental notions of detachment and reconnection.

Figure 10. "Ekalaya" (Mr. Lakon, 2021)

The last piece of Mr. Lakon's artwork discussed in this study is "Shivanataraja". In the *Kakawin Bharatayudha* story, Shivanataraja is Batara Guru, a manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva who is also known as the Lord of Dance. Batara Guru's cosmic dance symbolizes the perpetual cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction in the universe. In Hinduism, Batara Guru (Shiva) is part of the triad of major deities (*trimurti*). However, the Indonesian *wayang* narratives diverge from the original Hindu concept of *trimurti*. In Indonesian *wayang* stories, Batara Guru is the youngest son of the Supreme God (Sang Hyang Tunggal) along with his brothers Togog and Semar. Despite being the youngest, Batara Guru was the only one who inherited the throne of Sang Hyang Tunggal, governing three realms: the divine realm, the genie realm, and the human realm.

Mr. Lakon explained that he reinterpreted Batara Guru as a modern carefree teenager with celestial power. He portrayed Batara Guru as a modern and vibrant character wearing a cool mask, a stylish jacket, and baggy cargo pants. Cyberpunk fashion often features bold, eclectic, and unique styles, blending traditional punk elements with futuristic touch in the outfit. With that fashion style, as a Lord of Dance, Batara Guru looks even more like a modern hip-hop dancer.

Amidst the modern look, Mr. Lakon added a traditional element that is related to Batara Guru's character: a *siracaraka* background. In Hinduism, *siracaraka* is a symbol in the worship of primordial energy, symbolizing the cosmic processes of creation, preservation, and destruction.

Figure 11. "Shivanataraja" (Mr. Lakon, 2021)

Mr. Lakon's digital artworks create a captivating bridge between tradition and innovation. By reinterpreting iconic *wayang* characters through the lens of cyberpunk, he encapsulates the essence of these ancient tales within a modern context. His artistic creations have evoked diverse reactions among viewers. People who are not familiar with *wayang* for the first time often focus their commentary on the visual allure of his pieces. Then, that aesthetic engagement catalyzes curiosity to know more about *wayang*. Furthermore, those who understand *wayang* tradition perceive Mr. Lakon's artworks as an innovative contribution that offer a novel interpretation of *wayang* in a cyberpunk context.

Conclusion

The journey of *wayang* throughout history has been marked by dynamic transformations and continuous adaptation to the changing cultural and social conditions. Artists in each generation have different experiences in responding to their surrounding life. This ultimately influences how they interpret *wayang* which differs from the previous generation. In the modern era, it has been marked that many visual artists have an interest in integrating wayang elements into their artworks. This means wayang is timeless because it is not only relevant in ancient times, but also can be appreciated and reinterpreted in the future like what Mr. Lakon did through his artworks.

Mr. Lakon's artworks stand as an artistic expression that bridges the gap between tradition and modernity by using digital art as a medium. Through his three representative artworks, it can be seen that he tried to bring ancient narratives in *wayang* stories to the cyberpunk context. The concept of techno-mediated embodiment in cyberpunk turns out to be an interpretation of *wayang* when he depicted Ekalaya in his artwork.

Jevtič and Tomc mentioned that artists delving into digital art often make homages to classical art, celebrating its heritage and saving it from irrelevance. Mr. Lakon's artworks can be seen as an effort to appreciate and preserve *wayang* in the digital age. However, the extent of digital technologies in preserving *wayang* requires further research, as well as how to apply it not only in the form of digital art but also in performing art.

Acknowledgment

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