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Cite as: AIP Conference Proceedings **2347**, 020164 (2021); <https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0051906>
Published Online: 21 July 2021

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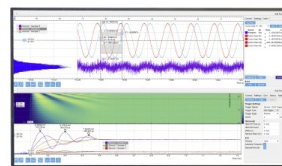
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Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa (2011) from a Film History Perspective

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Abstract. *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) is an adapted film, based on one of the well-known traditional Malay texts that seeks to elevate traditional Malay literature. The film is said to be quite special in Malaysian film history because it achieved a decent success internationally. It is produced by the local talent, Yusry Abd Halim. The film may have been popular among Malaysians, but there is still a lack of research on it, especially from the perspective of history. This paper thus seeks to address the historical aspects of the film using David Bordwell's theory, in particular, the 'historical poetics of cinema'. By applying this particular theory, this study will examine the historical aspects of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, from the original traditional text to the modern filmic product of the hikayat. Specifically, the thematic, narrative and stylistic elements will form bases of arguments in this research, following the framework of Bordwell's historical poetics of cinema. It is found that the film, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) has strong western influences or affiliations, perhaps due to demands on meeting up to international standards. This has resulted in massive changes of the original traditional text so as to 'suit' the demands of the international market.

INTRODUCTION

Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa (2011) is an epic film, produced by KRU Studio (later referred to as KRUS), which is based on the traditional Malay text of the same title. The release of the film is considered to be a stepping stone in making a local film an international movie [1]. KRUS also decided to produce *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* as a response to the lack of exposure on traditional Malay literature-based films at the international market [2]. Throughout the production of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, the script has gone through 17 times processing in conjunction with the narrative and dialogue aspects so as to facilitate the whole publishing process. There are many amendments involved in the process of interpreting the script to storyboards, especially for the war scenes. Besides, the film production also requires large quantities of extravagant costume and props supplies thus entailing a really high cost production. More than 50 Chinese military personnels are required and each of them costs approximately RM6000, just for clothing and weapons used in the production. It is estimated that KRUS has spent RM3 million on the costumes, construction items, and construction of ship sets within a year [3].

The filming process of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* took 52 days from 9 June 2009 to 8 August 2009. Since it is their first time producing an epic film, KRUS faced many challenges in the filming process especially during the rainy weather when all sets were destroyed. As a result, KRUS had to rebuild the set within a short period of time and used a computer-generated image (CGI) technique as another alternative. A total of 3000 shots were required for the CGI technique to produce a historical background for the film. The time taken to complete the post-creation process of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) is one year [3]. The hard work done by KRUS was paid off when the film broke a record in the local film industry grossing RM500 000 on the first day of its screening [3]. The rights of film distribution have also been sold to the United Kingdom (Metrodome), Germany (Ascot Elite Entertainment Group), Russia (Daro

Film Distribution), France (F.I.P Distribution), and 22 other countries in the Middle Eastern region. *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* has become the first widely distributed Malaysian film internationally and generated the most successful Malaysian film export earnings [2]. *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* has also achieved many recognitions in the Malaysian film industry where the film garnered eight awards in the 24th Malaysia Film Festival: Best Film award (KRU Studio), Best Original Music Score (Edry Abdul Halim), Best Costume Designer/Busana (Rosada Abdul Hamid), Best Cinematography (Md Nor Kassim), Best Art Composition (Anuar Paharudin), Best Theme Song (Anuar Zain), Best Visual Effects (Yusry Abdul Halim) and Best Poster (KRU Studio) [4]. The film also managed to collect RM6.3 million and it has surpassed the initial target set by KRUS which is RM6 million [5].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach as its main research methodology where a textual analysis is employed in the discussion as this may correspond to media studies, especially in the field of film study. Besides, the literary analysis is dealt with in reference to discussions on relevant books, newspapers, magazines, articles, journals and theses so as to get in-depth information about the history of the publication of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* and the theory of historical poetics of cinema by David Bordwell (1989). In understanding the article, the first part of this research focuses on investigating the exterior aspects of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* such as the surrounding situation of the film publishing era. These aspects are then examined from the perspective of its influence on the film's interior aspects: the thematic, narrative, and stylistic or stylistic elements of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*.

STUDY OUTCOMES

Thematic

The theme in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* resembles the thematic model in Hollywood. This is proven through the emphasis on the nationalism theme, which is prevalent as compared to other subthemes. The theme of nationalism is synonymous with Hollywood epic films such as *Gladiator* (2000), *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), *Troy* (2004), *King Arthur* (2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *300* (2006) and *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* (2008). Although *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) attempts to employ other subthemes, particularly the romance subtheme, but it is rather on a smaller scale thus incapable of making any changes or significant inferences to the main theme of the film.

The element of romance in Hollywood films is also not as dominant as compared to the Indian films. In *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, there are romance scenes involving two couples: Prince Hadrian with the Princess of China and Merong Mahawangsa with Embok. Expressions of feelings of love for each other are depicted moderately in the film. Thus it is clear that the film does not focus on the romance emotions. The couples' romance scenes are also simple without involving the fervent emotional outbursts in the film.

Narrative

In the narrative aspect, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* is influenced by the narrative style of Hollywood films. This can be seen through the clear mission of the character of Merong Mahawangsa who has successfully united the Prince of Rome with the Princess of China. The particular mission carried out by the main character from the beginning to the end of the story. This is in line with the linear nature of a classic Hollywood film narrative which emphasises a clear storytelling path in the film's narrative from the beginning to the end of the story.

The emphasis on 'cause and effect' that often seen in the classic Hollywood films is also depicted in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. This can be seen through various conflicts in the film: the kidnapping of the Princess of China, the murder of Lang and the sexual harassment of Embok. All these troubles lead to Merong Mahawangsa's retaliation of the Geruda pirates. The film thus portrays the evil side of humanity in wanting more power. Subsequently, wars and destructions ensued as shown in the film.

The use of flashback effects or 'old story re-storytelling' in the narrative is also inspired by classic Hollywood films. The flashback impression was first used in the 1900 era by D.W. Griffith in the film, *The Birth of Nation* (1915). This impression is also originally known as 'switchback'. Flashback effects are applied in the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* when Pak Kesum told the past story of Merong Mahawangsa and Taji's mother.

Stylistics

An analysis of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* finds that the film's stylistics is also based on the representation model of Hollywood. One of them is the recording approach that uses the 'point of view' method which is the earliest technique in Hollywood filmmaking. The use of point of view representing the views of actors or audiences began to be used in the West in the 1920s. Among the early figures who used this point of view technique was Dziga Vertov. He produced a documentary film titled *The Men with the Movie Camera* in 1929. Vertov argues that cameras are replacing human vision with the technical eye from camera lenses that are capable of seeing and recording truths that human will often forget. In line with this opinion, Vertov advocates Kino-Eye's approach in the film production model which contradicts conventional narratives by emphasizing the concealment of truth rather than dissecting it.

The use of point of view began to become popular in the style of filmmaking in Hollywood from the 1940s to the 1950s. Among the films that applied this technique were *Lady in the Lake* (1947) by Robert Montgomery, *Rear Window* (1954) by Alfred Hitchcock, and *Vertigo* (1958) by Alfred Hitchcock. In *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, the point of view technique can be seen through Merong Mahawangsa's character as a child when he was isolated and scolded by the villagers at the duration of 00:35:14 to 00:35:51. The grief caused Merong Mahawangsa to run and complain to his mother, Lang. In the act, Merong Mahawangsa's character is replaced by a camera view while the character of the villagers and Lang interact by simply looking at the camera.

Another recording technique known as time-lapse is also based on the filmmaking models in Hollywood. This technique is produced through recording objects for a certain duration of time and played in a video player at normal speed. It produces time circulation effects in movie scenes such as cloud movements, changes in daylight hours to night time, or night to day. Time-lapse is also used in science to study the phenomenon of slow changes such as biological fields to observe the development of tree growth and animal behavior, in a chemical field where it was used to understand fluid reactions as well as weather field to observe cloud formation.

Time-lapse techniques began in the field of photography that combined science, technology, magic, and animation. The time-lapse technique was first used in 1890 during a study of plant growth conducted by the Marey Institute in Paris through the use of Lucian Bull's automatic camera. The recording resulted in fifteen sequences of flower opening images. This technique was first applied in the film by George Melies in 1902 through *A Trip to the Moon* in the scene when a moon surface is crashed by a rocket controlled by a group of astronomers. This technique can also be seen in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* at the duration of 01:01:31 when the character of Merong Mahawangsa practices self-defense with Kesum on the hill. This scene uses time-lapse with the movement of clouds that describes the transition of time throughout the practice sessions.

Before the emergence of the lighting tool in the film world, most films in Hollywood relied on sunlight as the main lighting source. This can be seen through the Black Maria Studio that was built in 1892 by Thomas Edison where it uses a rotatable platform and glass roof to allow light to enter the studio for recording. The same system was also applied in the glasshouse in George Melies' studio that was built around 1897. In 1896, an artificial light system was introduced by the German filmmaker Oskar Messter. The system was then first used by bigger studios such as Edison in America in 1900. *Why Jones Discharged His Clerks* (1900) and *The Mystic Swing* (1900) were among Edison's earliest films that used artificial light systems to replace sunlight. Around 1905, major Hollywood film companies such as Edison, Vitagraph and Biograph began exploring creative lighting systems. Through exploitation, many discoveries were made in film lighting systems in Hollywood, especially after 1919. Among them are two-point lighting system and three-point lighting system. The two-point lighting system combines key light and fill light elements, while three-point lighting uses a key light, fill light and backlight.

In the lighting aspect, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* does not miss out on using Hollywood filmmaking models. This case can be seen through the use of a one-point lighting system, two-point lighting and three point-lighting. The one-point lighting system can be seen at 00:27:57 when the Princess of China flees the campsite and at 00:46:45 when the Princess of China and her maid are tied up in the Taji's stronghold. The two-point lighting system is also used at 00:21:15 when Merong Mahawangsa and The Prince of Rome see a corpse in a boat and at the duration of 00:25:51 when Merong Mahawangsa tells a story of his life as a child to the Chinese heroes. Meanwhile, the three-point lighting system is applied at 00:20:34 which is the scene in which Merong Mahawangsa monitors the surroundings of the sailboat he is boarding with the Prince of Rome, and at the duration of 00:35:43 in which Lang is seen reading a poem to Merong Mahawangsa.

There is also the involvement of the low key in lighting technique in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. The low key technique is synonymous with Hollywood filmmaking styles from the 1930s to the 1940s by Warner Bros in many scenes with detective and gangster themes. This technique is used to highlight tense and serious emotions in enhancing

the scenes' atmosphere. Some of the scenes that uses the low key technique are King Phra Ong Mahawangsa scene where he begins the storytelling at the beginning of the film with a duration of 00:00:22 to 00:01:00, the Roman and Chinese military camps at the coastline during at 00:25:33, the fort of the Geruda area at 00:46:32 and Kesum's shelter area at 00:48:38.

Computer-generated imagery (CGI) technique is an image production technology through the employment of computer applications that incorporates a combination of three-dimensional animation (3D) and visual reality (Gordon, 2016). Computer-generated imagery (CGI) techniques are well known in the style of filmmaking in Hollywood and began to be used in 1973 with a film titled *Westworld* directed by Michael Crichton. *Westworld* (1973) tells the story of a human-like robot that suffers a system damage prompting it to kill visitors at *Westworld*. Two-dimensional computer-generated imagery (CGI) (2D) techniques have been used in the film to show the perspective of the damaged robot characters. The sophistication of *Westworld* (1973) has encouraged other films to use three-dimensional (3D) computer-generated imagery (CGI) technologies such as *Futureworld* (1976), *Star Wars* (1977), *Tron* (1982) and *The Last Starfighter* (1984). In *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, computer-generated imagery (CGI) techniques can be observed through images of birds flying through the air at 00:01:08, an image of snow at 00:02:01, a ship image at 00:02:21, seawater image resonating at 00:02:40, a ship image sailing on a map at 00:02:50, an image of the moon moving across the clouds towards the top of the ship at 00:18:00, the effects of blood splashing during the battle with Geruda at 00:39:57, images of lightning and birds flying at 00:40:56, images of swords pierced through Kemawas's body by Prince of Rome and the burning effects of Geruda's tribe army when exposed to sunlight.

The use of dramatic construction can also be seen in the film editing technique in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. Dramatic construction is a method used in editing to produce an amazing or dramatic impact through a combination of several shots and editing techniques such as close-up, medium shot, long shot, extreme long shot, cross-cutting, and parallel cutting. This method was founded by D.W. Griffith around 1900 through several films such as *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (1908), *Enoch Arden* (1908), *The Lonely Villa* (1909), *Romana* (1911), *The Birth of Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) [6]. The combination of close-up, medium shot, long shot, and extreme long shot is seen at the duration from 00:13:50 to 00:14:09 when Merong Mahawangsa and Prince of Rome fight using swords on a sailboat. This fight started due to Merong Mahawangsa's reluctance to reveal the content of the scrolls hanging on his waist. Merong Mahawangsa's refusal has led to Prince of Rome's rage as he starts pointing his sword towards him. The dramatic impression of the fight is achieved through the combined use of shots as shown in the Table 1.

TABLE 1. Use of shots for the battle between Merong Mahawangsa and Prince of Rome

| Duration | Types of shot | Scene |
|----------|-------------------|---|
| 00:13:50 | Close-up | Prince of Rom forces Merong Mahawangsa to tell the truth about the scrolls |
| 00:13:53 | Medium Shot | Mahawangsa refuses to tell the truth and then stand while holding the sword |
| 00:13:55 | Long Shot | The battle begins between Prince of Rome and Mahawangsa |
| 00:14:01 | Long Shot | The battle between Prince of Rome and Mahawangsa |
| 00:14:02 | Medium Shot | Mahawangsa blocks the sword |
| 00:14:04 | Close-up | A dialogue by Merong Mahawangsa |
| 00:14:05 | Close-up | The reaction of Prince of Rome |
| 00:14:05 | Long shot | The battle between Prince of Rome and Mahawangsa |
| 00:14:05 | Close-up | Mahawangsa blocks Prince of Rome's sword and dialogue |
| 00:14:09 | Long Shot | Mahawangsa blocks Prince of Rome's sword |
| 00:14:09 | Extreme Long Shot | The battle between Prince of Rome and Mahawangsa |

The cross-cutting technique is used at 00:51:21 when Merong Mahawangsa talks about Embok's rough attitude towards him. The cross-cutting technique produces a dramatic impact in these scenes that show some conflicts between Merong Mahawangsa and Embok. The technique also expresses an emotional impact of romance on both characters when the cross-cutting is done on the facial expressions of Merong Mahawangsa and Embok when looking at each other. Besides, the cross-cutting technique is also used when Kesum persuaded Merong Mahawangsa to lead the village tribe against the Geruda pirate army at 00:59:31. The dramatic effect is achieved when Kesum reads the same poem that Lang had read to Merong Mahawangsa when he was a child. The exchange of images taking place between the two characters exudes a shock effect in Merong Mahawangsa until finally he agrees to lead the village tribe to fight against the Geruda pirates.

Meanwhile, the use of parallel cutting editing techniques is applied from minutes 01:08:02 to 01:13:57. At the duration from 01:08:02 to 01:10:32, scenes showing Taji performing a ritual ceremony predicting the fate of Geruda, where Taji advises Kemawas to be careful in protecting the magic pendant possessed by him, and the Maid of China's aides hears about the secret of the pendant owned by Kemawas. From 1:10:33 to 01:13:57, the film also shows the preparations made by the kingdoms of Merong Mahawangsa, China, and Rome in the port to oppose Geruda and the separation of Kesum and Embok with Merong Mahawangsa. Although the duration of both scenes is different, the use of parallel cutting makes these scenes appear as if they occur at the same time from different locations.

Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa also applies the dissolve effect that was first introduced by George Melies from the 1890s to 1920s. The use of the dissolve effect is important in editing techniques because it can manipulate the timeframe and viewer's emotions. Its use is also able to bring the audience to the future, past, or different locations [7, 8]. Some shots that use the dissolve effect in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* can be seen through the transition of the shots from the wide shot of the edge view to the wide shot of the front view in the Roman army ships scene at 00:02:25, the transition from a wide shot to a full shot of Chinese army ships at 00:18:03 and the transition of time and locations of Mahawangsa's training sessions with Guru Kesum scene and other locations of fighting scenes from 01:00:40 to 01:02:44.

The long take technique is also used in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* as a recording and editing style. Long take techniques are produced through camera footage without any scene cutting during the editing process. The technique is also well known in filmmaking in the West when film cameras were first created. Although at the beginning of the existence of long take was more of a recording of the theatre performances, Andre Bazin made it as an aesthetic value through the production of films in the West during the 1940s [9, 10]. This can be seen at minute 00:10:20 when the character of Merong Mahawangsa is helped by the Roman Prince to escape the death penalty while in Goa. This scene features footage and long-standing camera movements starting from Merong Mahawangsa's battle location up to the Prince Roman's yacht at the jetty.

Almost the entire fighting scenes in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* use fast cutting editing techniques. This technique can be seen to be employed at minutes 00:07:26 - 00:09:22 when Merong Mahawangsa has a fight with the heroes of Goa, minutes 00:13:55 - 00:15:20 when Merong Mahawangsa has a fight with the Prince of Rome on a ship, at duration 00:37:43 - 00:44:23 of war scenes between the Roman army, China and Garuda, at duration 00:56:07 - 00:57:35 that shows a scene where Taji launches an attack on Merong Mahawangsa's village, at duration 01:00:44 - 01:01:03 i.m. where Merong Mahawangsa undergoes self-defense training sessions with Pak Kesum, at duration 01:01:39 - 01:01:59 i.m. where Merong Mahawangsa is involved in a match with Embi and 01:20:08 - 01:41:40 which is the last battle between Geruda and the army of Merong Mahawangsa, Rome and China. Fast cutting editing technique is an editing technique that exposes the quick transition between shots to shots. This editing technique has been used as a style in Hollywood film editing since the 1960s. The main purpose of its use is to produce a sense of suspense and pressure. Fast cutting editing techniques are also known as flash cutting and are often used in Hollywood contemporary films, especially in action films [11].

CONCLUSION

Overall, the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) is heavily influenced by the film production model of Hollywood. The cinematic mode that is in high demands during the filming era of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) is so dominant resulting in the film having to refer to Hollywood filmmaking models. Besides, the surrounding situation in the 21st century of Malay film industry which has been inundated with the influx of Hollywood films, may have prompted the production of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011), particularly KRUS to look up to Hollywood as a model reference. The high response to foreign films by local audiences also may also contribute to KRUS producing international films so as to be able to compete in both local and global markets. It is evident that there are significant influences of Hollywood film models as seen through the discussions on the three elements: thematical, narrative and stylistics in *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011). The incorporation of Hollywood film models in the production can be attributed to the success of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) at international level albeit its failure or lack of championing the true Malay spirit in the film.

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