

APPRECIATING CERGAM THE INDONESIA'S COMICS AS MEDIUM OF HISTORICAL EVENT THROUGH FICTIONAL STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses some trending style in later Indonesian comic book publication, which provides a nostalgic nuance through its illustration by using only black and white drawing technique. The story itself is fiction, yet it brings back the sense of a historical event on the past. For the sake of discussion on Indonesia comics, so called Cerita Gambar (cergam), on how the picture stories of Indonesian comics restored a sense of nostalgia colored by the background of historical event as we can read in the two titles that are being studied here in this article, titled *Katumbiri Regenboog* (2022) authored and illustrated by Yaya Riyadin, and *Karimata 1890* (2019) authored and illustrated by Toni Masdiono. This study argued that the art from the point of view of formal, artistic and aesthetic appreciation on historical background which is nuanced the fictional story of cheerful images by those two *cergamis* can be a form of reservation of the past brought back to the current popular medium such as *Cergam*, the Indonesian comics. The carefully chosen of printed media and illustration techniques carried by both illustrators enliven the artistic and cultural value to fictional stories with a historical nuance. This made suggestion if a comic is inspired or based upon a historical event, even if the story is fiction, yet it can instill memories of those historical events itself. With such eloquence of the visual language of comics drawing, it is achievable to make it preserved the historical moment that still anchored to its objective realities however fictional it was made.

Keywords: *Aesthetic experience, Artistic research, Immerse, Preserve, Storytelling.*

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A. INTRODUCTION

The use of the term *cerita gambar* or in short: “cergam”, assigned by *cergamis* Zam Nuldyen (1922 – 1988), deliberately has two in one meaning, one referring in generalization to mention the comic medium in Indonesia, and at the same time it exclusively referring the specific name to identify Indonesia's comics. If referring to the research of the psychobiologic, Roger W. Sperry (1913-1994), the initiator of the theory of brain duality in the late 1960s, then comics as a visual-verbal medium is clearly a significant medium of our societal culture. The reason to study visual images because its everywhere and we voluntarily face images at anywhere without any compulsion to read them most of the time (Holm, 2008, p. 325). Most of people stated Burger (1998), spend

a lot of physical and emotional energy doing the act of staring at the visual objects surrounding us, and this act inevitably plays role in the culture of our century (Sturken & Cartwright 2018). Henry Matthews, author of the 240-page 'Encyclopedia of Lebanese Comic Books', once said that "Pop culture is a part of our heritage — It should be preserved too." (Preserving Cultural History Through Comic Books | LAU News, 2010). Sturken & Cartwright (2018) in 'Practice of Looking' noted that studying the visual culture is, "...about seeing how things are displayed and seeing what we are not shown, what we do not see....", yet, it is also to, "...consider what is not visible...." That our, "...culture matters, and images matter, in every aspect of our lives" (p.12). Priego, E. & Scott, S. (2020) recorded their conversation with two creators who create an application experimenting that reuses image properties of a cultural heritage to create comics digitally through its online collections.

Purnama (2021) stated that, "Indonesian comic has always been a medium to teach local wisdom and culture." She renounced David Kwa, a culture expertise whom identified historical-cultural elements in the fashion found in one of renown comics characters Put On. Put On reflects the common Peranakan (Malay-Chinese) citizen life in Indonesia back then in 1920-30s. It was an Indonesian comic, even before the Indonesia' Republic proclaimed the Independence Day in 1945, and it was designed by one of the earliest proponent Peranakan comics artists named Kho Wang Gie (1908 - 1983). There is a lack of study based on reading the visual of comics found in a comic study in local academic readings. Many still unable to appreciate comic in its own visual form as a valuable work of aesthetic experience. The comics studied here comes from current day publication, created by two prominent comic artists renowned for their illustration works. Toni Masdiono (1961-) and Yaya Riyadin (1960-) are two Indonesian illustrators, who launches fictional comics with the historical background twisted in its visual storytelling, showing their expertise in handling the most basic drawing technique, namely black and white drawing pen ink on paper. This study argued that those comics as the work of art from the point of view of formal artistic as a valuable demands aesthetic appreciation. On the approach of visual interpretation on historical background nuanced the fictional story of cheerful images by the two artists, or *cergamis* somewhat a popular calling to identify Indonesian comics artist, comics can be said as a form of reservation of the past brought back to the current popular medium such as *Cergam*, a specific term to recall the Indonesian comics.

B. METHOD

This paper is an initiation to preliminary study which mainly researches into the discipline of artistic production of knowledge by reading the firsthand physical comic book titles a) Karimata

1890, authored by Toni Masdiono, published in 2019 by Creative Media in Jakarta, Indonesia b) Katumbiri Regenboog, authored by Yaya Riyadin, published in 2022 by Grafiti Indah Karya in Tangerang Selatan, Indonesia. “In the age of digitization comic book not only survived but even thrived, “as argued by Aaron Kashtan (2018) that, “comics offer a model on how the printed book can survive despite competition for digital technology” (pp. 3-5). Our research method would be fell into the poles of qualitative approaches, nonetheless, we are focused on reading the visual form of the artworks by using the art theoretical framework, and narrowing into the study of drawing. The purpose of the preliminary study is not to find correctness between the pictorial images drawn in the books compare to the real object, people or environment outside the drawings, indeed, we are not looking for the objectivity in what was drawn in the comics. As qualitative study, the research manner treats the comics either such as archival research or as in term of a documentary analysis, which is interpretive, subjective and rather impressionistic as we are aiming to do the subjective artistic research method by analyzing the visual form that gives a fruitful sense of impressions to our objective eyes.

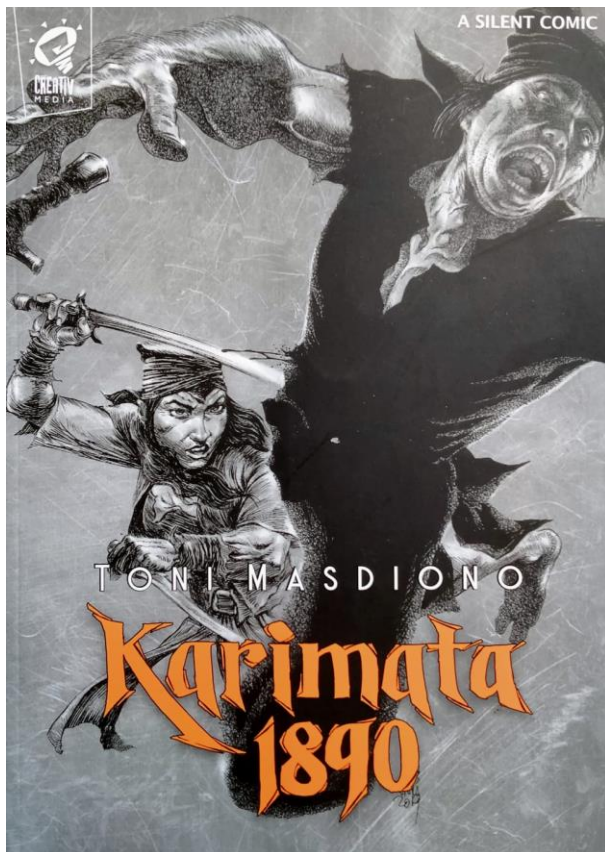


Figure 1. Karimata 1890 (2019), Toni Masdiono. Creative Media Author's collection

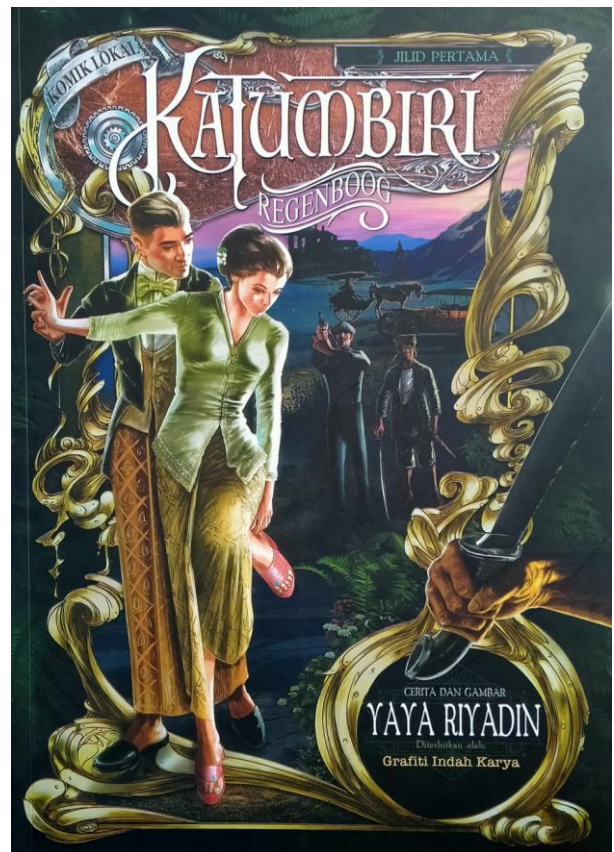


Figure 2. Katumbiri Regenboog (2022), Yaya Riyadin. Grafiti Indah Karya. Author's collection

Researcher randomly chooses several pages from both comic books and discussed about the detail inking and lines drawing exposed through the printed paper's surface. Lead by the phenomenological attitude in the mind, the researcher draws out what phenomenon found in the first impression on him as the eye of the beholder sees the meaningful of what he catches through the drawings appears in the pages.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The things that come up, while reading the visual foreground of pictorial representation through the inking and line drawings, that the picture stories evoke the feeling of being taken to a memory of the past. A phenomenon of lived in the historical background drawn through the pictorial drawing of the comics that is not actually recorded in the reader's mind. Its likely reader mind was absorbed to travel through time set forth and back from present to the past then back again to the present time. Nonetheless, the time here is not the 'real' empirical time, it is sort of enliven sense of being in a time, in the past, not an actual past which reader experiencing it in present time in the act of reading the comic book.

The story of 'Karimata 1890' took place in Batavia, Indonesia in the past time while being colonized partly by the Dutch as it is implied in the pictorial images in Figure 3. It was, in short about a conspiracy against Indonesians pirate around the Karimata Straits nearby Batavia's port. Actually, our history was written by the modern people, it is not the things that picked up from time travelling machine journey. History is a modern thoughtful interpretation of the things or the event that happened in the past. E.H. Gombrich begin his 'A Little History of the World' (2005) with, " ...this story is all about: what happened, once upon a time" (p. 1). History is a story fulfills with the lived imagination of the world.

In accordance to Nancy Pedri (2022) writes that silent comics is "a form or genre of comics that relies entirely on visual images to narrate the story" (p.107). 'Karimata 1890' was intentionally designed by the author solely to the silent comics, a sort of method or way of storytelling in comics without the uses of any textual display on the pages. Its inking techniques, cross-hatching through the pages remind us the way of marking on surfaces, sensing and scraping the pulp of paper, scratching, pointing, from the blank page brings up the picturesque appears slowly emerges and reveals its form into recognizable objects of drawing. The inking and cross-hatching the blackness and the whiteness bring forth and back plays the light and shadow, gives us the sense perception of depth on those flatness of the paper's surface as we can see through in Figure 4. Although the picture seems fix in the pages, yet, it's inviting the eyes to see it from in-front to back-front, below darker from the based-ground lights up to the upper-ground, whilst at the same moment the river

watering going down to the bottom of the page. While the realization of the pictorial completes our experience of seeing things, somehow our mind relates it to the memory of the past. Even though it must not be the exact re-imagining of our recorded moments or places happening in the past, but it surely the memory brings back them into the present reading. It might not even be an event or place that we had experienced ourselves in the past.

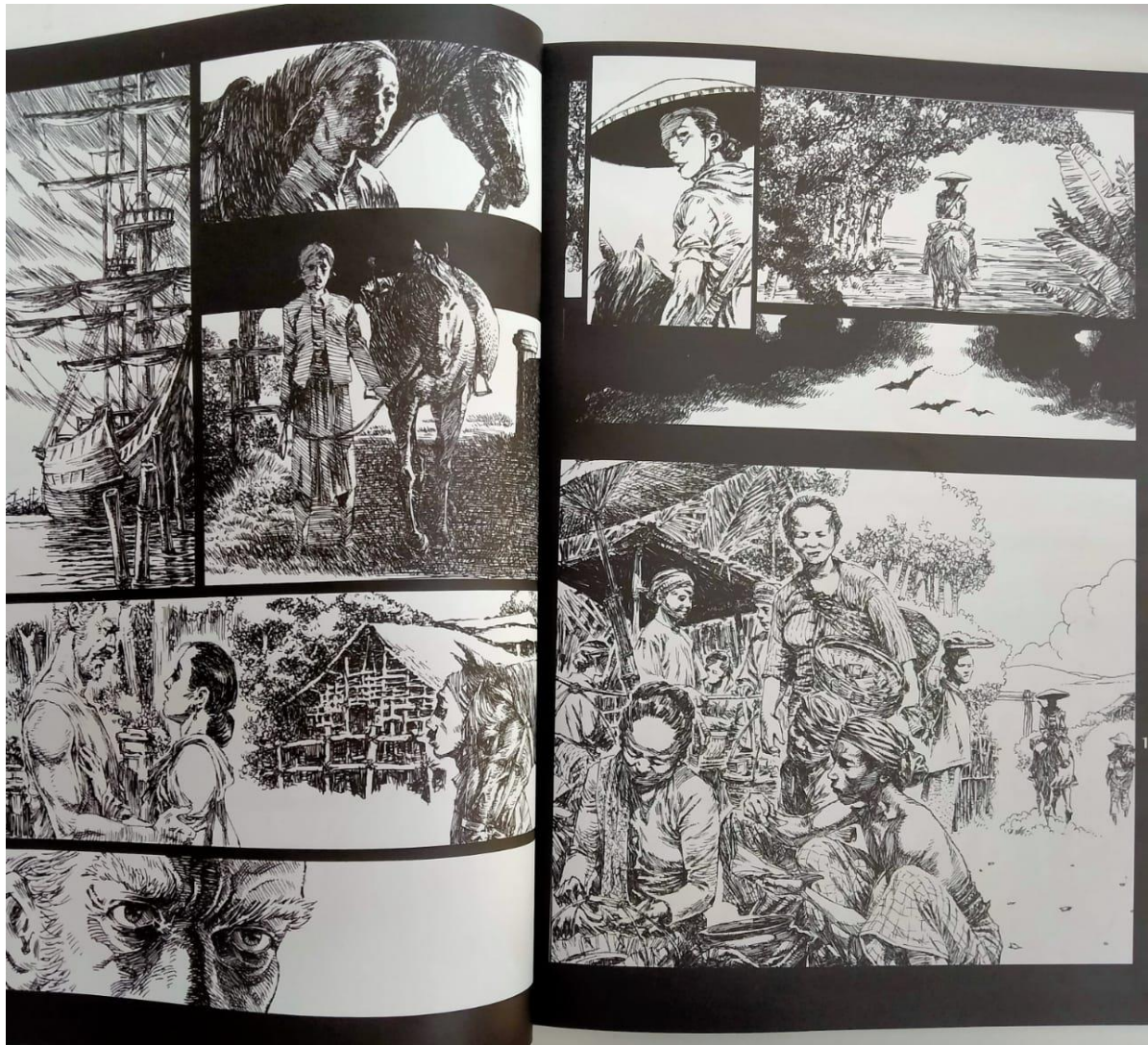


Figure 3. Karimata 1890, Toni Masdiono, Creative Media, pages. 14-15

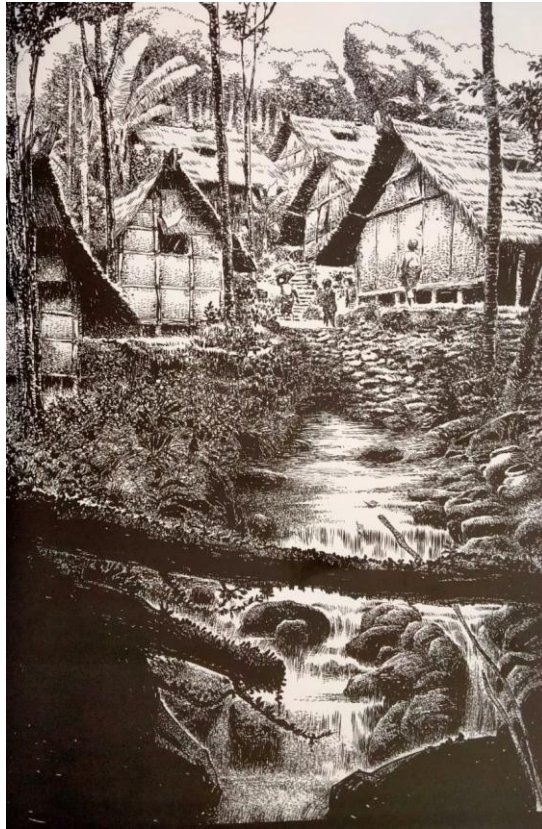


Figure 4. Karimata 1890, Toni Masdiono, Creative Media, pages. 27

It also does not have to be a place that is drawn correctly or exactly represents the same place somewhere in the real objective place. Yet, the sense of being in there, in the drawing somehow gives an authentic feeling of the place when we as reader immerse into the visual storytelling. The visual immersion of the reader's mind that fully involved into the story helps the comics open up a world as if we are living inside the time being. Figure 5 and Figure 6 are pages from *Katumbiri Regenboog*, Vol.1, the premise of this comic is telling the story of a figure named Ganesha which is set in Bandung in the present and in the early 20th century. When he examined a bridge built in the early 20th century that technically surpassed his time, he suddenly ventured into the past, to the Dutch Colonial era in 1915, then involved in conflict and romance with a local girl.

If *Karimata 1890* is fully situated in the past, *Katumbiri* plays backward and forward travelling through the times. As admitted by Tanzil, who is not a comic lover and rarely read comics, he felt the shading in these comics are stunning and lively. Each pictorial image is made with great detail so that the reader felt fully animate the excitement of the story in the comics. However, even a very precise depiction of a photograph of the same object, or the same place, or even the same situation captured, illustrating or redrawing a photograph in highly realistic method does not make it merely become a replica of the objects. We come to experience the world of comics in itself, not by closing the eyes and imagining a photograph, but lived-experience the

drawings, the illustration comes alive. It becomes a realization and moves us to follow the lines of drawing if it was so great at detailing each corner framed in comic panels. Its drawing invites the reader to dive into the atmosphere of the pictorial world it possessed.



Figure 5. Katumbiri, Yaya Riyadin, Grafiti Indah Karya, p. 43. Author's collection

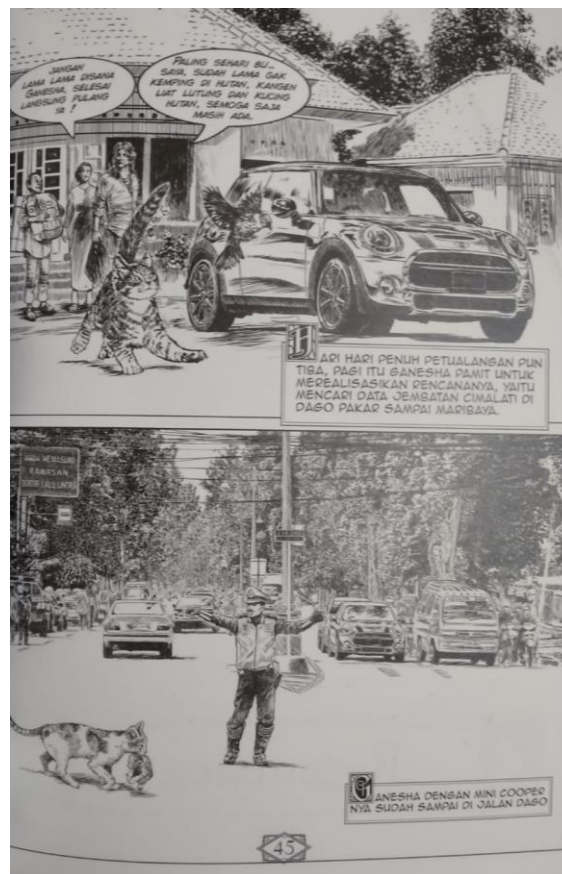


Figure 6. Katumbiri, Yaya Riyadin, Grafiti Indah Karya, p. 45. Author's collection

In the figure 6, the above panel of page 45 of Katumbiri, we can identify a cat chasing a bird, and the panel below shows a cat bringing her baby cat. Both actions get along with the background situation. The cat which chasing a bird is put in a fully drawn background, whilst the cat bringing a kitten puts on quite half page of blank background indicating a boulevard street. Both of them becomes the figure of the panels, yet at the same point of views, both actually only a gimmick or decorated illustration to add a lively action into the pages. Indeed, the illustrations on both panels, as the panels on the other pages of the comic, are depicted with a very neat and stunning outlining precision. The details on both panels is drawn with a consistent quality of lines hatching and cross-hatching to get it quite impressive rendering on shading and blending. This technique, the way both artists handle it, made us to think about a primary basic of drawing technique that everybody could do, learn and mastering it. The results printed on book-paper quality surfaces give the sense of an old master etching technique, which we can trace it back to the Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-

1669), the Dutch painter and printmaker, who championed the golden era of Baroque in the Netherlands.

Both comics, *Karimata 1890* and *Katumbiri Regenboog*, has shown us its reader the capability of the art of drawing such in detail of realistic depiction of an object, environment, event and placed situation, can give such an exciting of aesthetic experiences. The achievement of artistic reproduction of pictorial illustration upon the real concrete reality is no doubt, yet something more fruitful experience is not found in the precision or accuracy of the outside reality. Moreover, it is found in the drawing which open up the world that belongs to the comics itself, which further makes the reader embodied and walked through sense in the storyline. It is not even the precise representational that makes it real, but the direct presence of a fictional subject approaching realization which makes it closer to the reality rather than just real in an objective sense. Likewise, the drawing technique used in the comic illustration brings to mind Rembrandt's great legacy painting technique of light and shade, a distinguished technique, which brings the true to life poetic beauty.

D. CONCLUSION

In the world of comics, what can be achieved is not merely the pursuit of an objective picture that depicts accuracy or precision in describing objects or situations where people make them alive and real. However, the lack of accuracy, incompleteness, distortion and simplification of shapes make them alive and real in the mind of the reader who take part to complete, or reassembles the parts that are missing. There is a back and forth movement swinging between seeing and imagining that is complementary to what is discovered and what is covered, the comics intertwines the visibility and invisibility.

It is interesting to see how the pictorial world of comics that are juxtaposed in a sequence build upon a world that can be experience lively of readers. Although the world depicted in the illustration has never been visited promptly by the reader, but the way it depicts by using certain techniques so well by the illustrator or comic artist makes the drawings become communicative and giving the artistic experience to the reader. Thus, it builds an image in the reader's memory of a historic event, or the location of a historical event that either still exists nowadays or no longer exist.

This made suggestion if a comic is inspired or based upon a historical event, even if the story is fiction, yet it can instill memories of those historical events itself. With such eloquence of the visual language of drawing in comics, when the illustrator pouring a flash of 'history' into his/her comics, without the tendency of pursuing documentary archiving accuracy, it is achievable to make

it a sense preserved the historical moment. It is a form of preserving the cultural heritage of a society that still anchored to its objective realities, however fictional it was made.

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