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**Mixed Media to Build a New Interpretation of the 1965–1966 Massacre in
Indonesia from the Victim’s Point of View in W.J.T. Mitchell’s Perspective**

PhD Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

The significance of the image has been a central topic of discourse both in the academic sphere and public culture in recent decades. W.J.T. Mitchell calls this change the “pictorial turn” to mark a shift from the linguistic turn. The pictorial turn also impacts genocide and massacre studies. Images are not only tools for illustrating, but are also the main elements that contribute to knowledge formation of tragedy and memory transmission. The central concern of this research is mixed media, a graphic narrative entitled *Sejarah Gerakan Kiri Indonesia untuk Pemula* [The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners]. This mixed media work is a powerful instrument to build a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia from the victims’ point of view, based on Mitchell’s perspective.

The 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia killed more than 500,000 and arrested more than one million people without trial. The massacre targeted the members or partisans of the Indonesian Communist Party [*Partai Komunis Indonesia*] (PKI). In addition, the state used many cultural products, such as films and monuments, as means of indoctrination. In reaction to the situation, many survivors and artists have created alternative narratives of the 1965–1966 massacre in various media. One of the victim narratives is a 527-page illustrated book entitled *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* (2016), published by a group of illustrators, coordinated by Yayak Yatmaka.

This research employs Mitchell’s key concepts, such as the pictorial turn, metapicture, biopicture, the relationship of image and text, and images’ power, to examine mixed media and its power to build a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia.

This study suggests that mixed media can be a powerful instrument to represent the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia, primarily through its metapicture of perpetrators in animal visual metaphors and metapicture of mass violence in visual excess. This study also finds that Indonesia’s 1965–1966 massacre image is a biopicture that always transforms into other media, despite the Indonesian state’s banning of the victim narrative. To enhance the viewers’ understanding of the massacre, the illustrated book employs a visual narrative to support the verbal narrative. The victim narrative mixed media also uses the “image against image” strategy to counter the master narrative’s images.

Keywords: Pictorial Turn, Metapicture, Biopicture, W.J.T. Mitchell, Mixed Media, the 1965–1966 Massacre, Indonesia, Victim Narrative.

1. Background of Problem

The “pictorial turn” coined by William John Thomas (W.J.T.) Mitchell marked a significant change in the academic sphere and public culture, in which the image became a central discourse topic (Mitchell, 1994: 11–13). Before the pictorial turn, the “linguistic turn” focused on the relationship between language, language users, and the world. The linguistic turn emphasizes the role of language in constituting knowledge (Bachmann-Medick, 2016: 22). In contrast, the pictorial turn emphasizes ‘the power of images’ to construct knowledge.

The pictorial turn has also affected discourse on images’ significance in genocide studies. Recently, genocide studies has been consolidated with many other disciplines, including film and media studies. In genocide studies, the image is no longer about how it can provide “illustrations for reinforcing other claims, but rather...in what ways images contribute both to the knowledge of events and to the transmission of memory, whether individual or collective” (Zylberman and Sánchez-Biosca, 2018: 1). Scholars debate graphic narratives’ capacity to portray violence (Veld, 2019: 1–2) and influence the audience to embrace humanity. They have often doubted graphic narratives’ ability to convey serious topics, such as a massacre. Some questions have emerged around this topic: “Was it too dangerous to turn violence into such an accessible style, like comics?”, “Would it end up with banalizing, objectification, and insensitivity of victims?” (Evans, 2021: 242).

For some people, graphic narratives, like graphic novels, picture books, and comic books, do not adequately represent genocide because of visual excess, emotional manipulation, and a simplification of the moral and political situation (Veld, 2019: 2). Conversely, graphic narratives can become a powerful tool to speak victims’ voices because it allows for a discussion and reflection about the massacre (Veld, 2019: 3).

The main hypothesis of this research is that mixed media, such as the graphic narrative entitled *Sejarah Gerakan Kiri Indonesia untuk Pemula (The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners)*, is a powerful instrument for reinterpreting the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia from the victim’s point of view, based on Mitchell’s perspective. This research focuses on mixed media, especially the relation of text and image in graphic narrative form. Mixed media can help victims tell the truth about the massacre. Further, this research will contribute to the search for alternative media to enhance the historical understanding of Indonesia’s 1965–1966 massacre.

The 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia is one of the worst massacres of the twentieth century. “Hundreds of thousands of people were massacred by the army and army-affiliated militias” across Indonesia, “largely in Central Java, East Java, and Bali, from late 1965 to mid-1966” (Roosa, 2006: 4). General Suharto led the extermination hundreds of thousands accused of being involved and affiliated with the Communist Party. Amid the national emergency, “Suharto used the movement as a pretext for delegitimizing Sukarno and catapulting himself into the presidency” (Roosa, 2006: 4).

For 32 years of Suharto’s dictatorship, Indonesians lived under “the ideological hegemony of the state terrorism perpetrators” (Wieringa and Nursyahbani, 2019: 2). The Indonesian state uses many cultural products, like monuments, film, and literature, as means of indoctrination. For example, they use the army-controlled media (*Angkatan Bersendjata* and *Berita Yudha*), the book entitled *Tragedi Nasional Percobaan Kup G30S/PKI di Indonesia* [The National Tragedy of the G30S/PKI Attempted Coup in Indonesia], and the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* [The

Betrayal/Treachery of the Communists' 30 September Movement/PKI] (Heryanto, 2014: 78).

Suharto's regime called itself the New Order, while Sukarno's regime was the Old Order. After the New Order took power, Indonesia reoriented itself as a pro-Western country, while millions of survivors and their relatives lost their civil rights. The state never organized any reconciliation or officially apologized to the victims, even after Suharto fell in 1998. In contemporary post-authoritarian Indonesia, after 1998, the New Order's views of left organizations and mass violence remain dominant. Left-wing organizations were considered cruel and bloodthirsty. Even today, the 1965–1966 issues remain unclear, and the state has not acknowledged that they are responsible for the 1965–1966 massacre (Eickhoff et al., 2017: 449).

In formal education, the school system becomes a tool for indoctrination (Leksana, 2009: 176). In the New Order era, every student was obliged to watch the film *The Betrayal/Treachery of the Communists' 30 September Movement/PKI*, which indoctrinated audiences about the cruelty of the Communist Party that killed several generals. History lessons in school also repeatedly emphasized that the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) was bloodthirsty and deserved to be suppressed (Leksana, 2009: 176). After Suharto's resignation as president in May 1998 – the Reformation Era – there are greater possibilities to discuss the 1965–1966 violence. Facts about the number of victims and their suffering were revealed (Leksana, 2009: 176). However, twenty years after the reformation, high school textbooks reported again that the Communist Party was responsible for the October 1, 1965 incident. There are some new inventions about the 1965–1966 massacres, but history as taught according to the school system's curriculum has not changed significantly (Leksana, 2009: 177). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the 1965–1966 mass violence formed two years after Suharto's resignation. However, it has little support because most Indonesians are still not well-informed about the violence, except for the indoctrination of the New Order regime. Most people have inadequate knowledge about the massacre from the victims' point of view (Leksana, 2009: 176).

The main background to this dissertation is the fact that the emergence of many studies and book publications about the 1965–1966 massacre (such as Robert Cribb (2001), Saskia E. Wieringa (2002), John Roosa (2006), Geoffrey Robinson (2017), and Jess Melvin (2018)) did not change the New Order's dominant view in contemporary post-authoritarian Indonesia (after 1998). This circumstance came to be because of political censorship (the banning of communism/Marxism/Leninism teachings), less interest in studying Indonesian history, and limited access to this historical knowledge. Therefore, the research that examines the victim narrative of the 1965–1966 massacre in alternative media is important and relevant. Indonesians need to understand the massacre in more accessible media, such as graphic narrative, theater, or film. Furthermore, compared to historical explanation and study, art has more advantages, such as being more interesting, attractive, and universal.

The new interpretation of the massacre is still relevant today also because there have only been a few serious actions undertaken by the state to solve this issue, despite strong pressure from institutions concerned with human rights and victims of the 1965–1966 massacre (Bielecki, 2018: 232). The current president, Joko Widodo, has vowed to settle past human rights cases, including the 1965–1966 massacre. Yet, the government maintains the master narrative of the massacre in monuments, school textbooks, and film screenings (Parahita and Yulianto, 2020: par. 16). In reaction to this situation, some artists and survivors manifest their new interpretations of the 1965–1966 massacres in artworks (Bielecki, 2018: 232). The dominance of the master

narrative of this portion of Indonesia's history has led to the current state wherein the massacre and its representation presents an unresolved problem. From the victim's point of view, the scarcity of the historical knowledge of 1965–1966 can preserve the violent culture (Cribb, 2002: 556). In this case, art can help the victims to break their silence and articulate their voices (Ikhwan, 2019: 10).

One of the artists manifest the counter-narrative of the 1965–1966 massacres in graphic narrative. Yayak Yatmaka, for example, coordinated a group of illustrators who published *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* (2016), consisting of 537 pages of graphic narrative. The book speaks about the left movement in Indonesia from colonialism (seventeenth century) to the reformation period (after 1998), including the 1965–1966 massacre that targeted leftist proponents. In the graphic narrative, the authors depict the 1965–1966 massacres in visual metaphor and detailed drawings, including the various ways of torturing people suspected of being Indonesian Communist Party's/ [PKI]'s members or sympathizers. This graphic narrative aims to prevent similar atrocities from happening again.

As this study will show in Chapter IV, the graphic narrative has some benefits in depicting mass violence. Unlike in cinema and theater, the graphic narrative allows nonlinear reading, thus the reader can skim over an entire page to grasp the whole image of a traumatic experience. (Spiegelman, 2011: 166).

This research uses of *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* as the central topic of analysis because it is the most comprehensive graphic narrative about the Indonesian left movement and the 1965–1966 massacre. Previously, in 2011, a graphic narrative entitled *Djinah 1965, Years of Silence* was created by Evans Poton and published by Menara Warungku, IKJ-TIM, Interrographic, and consists of 101 pages. However, this graphic narrative only focuses on Ms. Sudjinah's life (1928–2007) as a member of Gerwani (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia* [Indonesian Women's Movement]) and a victim of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia, while *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* was created based on testimonies of many victims in many provinces across Indonesia. In other words, *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement* is a creative and meticulous graphic narrative that speaks about the extermination of Indonesians in 1965–1966. This illustrated book also includes references that the reader can use for further examination. Thus, the book can be seen as an introduction to trigger a further investigation into the 1965–1966 massacre.

Many researchers have examined the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia, though mainly focused on the historical investigation of physical and direct violence and the consequences of the massacres (Herlambang, 2011: 3). Some research, consisting of both theses and journal articles, discusses art and its relation to the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia, yet does not analyze the role of mixed media, especially a graphic narrative, in building a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia. Previous research has examined cultural elements, such as the cultural ideology of liberalism known as universal humanism, and the official version of the 1965 coup's attempt to justify and normalize violence against alleged communists in the 1965–1966 massacre (Herlambang, 2011); how films and performance art can contribute to the process of dealing with Indonesia's past (Bielecki, 2018); contestation of the 1965–1966 massacre narratives on YouTube (Parahita and Yulianto, 2020; Ikhwan et al., 2018); criticism of Joshua Oppenheimer's film *The Act of Killing* (Paramaditha, 2013); and the works of two Indonesian artists, namely Dadang Christanto's paintings and Tintin Wulia's installation and performance

projects, that provide new ways of understanding and responding to the historical trauma of the 1965–1966 mass killings (Dirgantoro, 2020).

Unlike previous research about the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia, this study focuses on the examination of mixed media, specifically the graphic narrative entitled *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners*, in order to reinterpret the massacre from the victims' point of view, in W.J.T. Mitchell's perspective. This research uses Mitchell's theory that deals with the complexities and paradoxes between image and text and the relation of image to the questions of power, politics, and ideology (Bohrer, 1997: 559). The perspective suits this research since this study discusses mixed media and its power to build a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia, a political and historical tragedy.

This research aims to analyze the graphic narrative *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* as a victim narrative using Mitchell's categories. Furthermore, this research also has the purpose of demonstrating the relevance of Mitchell's key concepts (such as the pictorial turn, metapicture, biopicture, and the relationship between text and image) in the discussion of the graphic narrative.

2. Research Problem

The fundamental problem of this research is “How can mixed media build a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia from the victims' point of view, in W.J.T. Mitchell's Perspective?”

Some questions arise from this fundamental problem, such as: What is mixed media? How did the 1965–1996 massacre in Indonesia take place? How do the master and victim's narratives or points of view see Indonesia's 1965–1966 massacre? What is Mitchell's theory of media? How does Mitchell's perspective see the mixed media with which to build a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia?

3. Structure of Dissertation

This research consists of five chapters. The first chapter is the “Introduction,” which presents the background to the problem, states the main research problem, defines technical terms, and reviews the structure of the research. This chapter also describes the gap in the existing research about the 1965–1966 massacres and the contribution of this research to academic discourse and the public. Chapter II is a historical examination of Indonesia's 1965–1966 massacres. This chapter discusses the 30 September Movement and the coup, as well as five theories regarding the perpetrators. It also depicts the master and victim narratives of the 1965–1966 massacre. Chapter III explores the conceptual framework that is applied in this research, i.e., Mitchell's theory. This chapter discusses Mitchell's key concepts, such as the pictorial turn, metapicture, the difference between image and picture, biopicture, and the relationship between image and text. It also examines Mitchell's notion of the relationship between images and power. Chapter IV analyzes how mixed media can build a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacres from Mitchell's perspective. This chapter also presents the graphic narrative's power to represent a massacre, the metapicture of the massacre, the victim narrative as a biopicture, and the image and text relationships in the illustrated book that support the victim narrative of the massacre. Chapter IV concludes with the “image against image” strategy that offers a

new interpretation of Indonesia's 1965–1966 massacre and virtual space as the new opportunity to Indonesian social-commentary comics. Lastly, Chapter V summarizes the research and presents the conclusion as well as suggestions for future studies and the use of mixed media to construct a victim narrative of Indonesia's past.

4. Summary and Conclusions

This study investigates how mixed media can build a new interpretation of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia from the victim's point of view in Mitchell's perspective. The results indicate that a mixed media work entitled *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* is a powerful tool to build the victims' narrative of the massacre, particularly through its pictorial power to represent the massacre, its metapicture of perpetrators and mass violence, and its biopicture of the massacre.

This study has yielded several results. First, this research has shown that the victim narrative of the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia aims to counter the master narrative, which remains dominant until today. Chapter II elaborates on the 30 September Movement, the coup, and its aftermath. There are at least five theories regarding the identity of the Movement's mastermind: the PKI, the Indonesian military, the UK-US intervention, Suharto, and the Mao-Sukarno-Aidit conspiracy. Even today, the 1965 coup's mastermind remains controversial. The mastermind could also be a convergence of multiple actors, not a single actor. The master narrative claims that the mastermind was the PKI and that they therefore deserved to be exterminated. The Indonesian state used this claim to legitimate their violence against those supposedly involved in leftist organizations. The victim narrative counters the master narrative's argument. The military and army-affiliated militias were the perpetrators, while the victims were those who were supposedly members of the PKI and affiliated organizations. They were not only major political figures but also common people from different backgrounds and professions. The victims and survivors have created many artworks that present the victim narrative of Indonesia's 1965–1966 massacre. One of these artistic expressions is *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners*.

Second, this study has systematized several of Mitchell's key concepts in Chapter III. The first concept is the pictorial turn, which marked a shift of focus from language to image and visibility, in philosophy, public culture, and academic discourse. In the pictorial turn, the image is a complex interplay between aesthetics, politics, media, technology, power, ideologies, and many others. The second concept is the metapicture, a picture that can reflect on its nature, its representation process, and the humans' world as the picture creator. One can find a metapicture, for example, in an image that appears in an image. The third concept is biopicture. Biopicture emphasizes images' living characters. Like living things, images can multiply and transform from one media to another. The fourth concept is the relationship between text and image. The text contains a pictorial dimension, and the image inherently contains a textual dimension. Both text and image are composite art or mixed media that combine "different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes" (Mitchell, 1994: 94–95). The last concept is the relationship between picture, power, and violence. Images play important roles in the reproduction of technological power and knowledge. Images can reproduce control but can also challenge it. However, for now, images' power seems to create a "spectacle and

surveillance society.” These key concepts are required to analyze how mixed media challenges Indonesia’s master narrative of the 1965–1966 massacre.

Third, Chapter IV explores the pictorial turn in the massacre representations that highlights the power of images to affect readers, open up discussion on the massacre, and even trigger the reader to act responsibly.

Fourth, the mixed media work can be a powerful instrument to represent the 1965–1966 massacre in Indonesia, especially through its metapicture of perpetrators in animal metaphors and metapicture of mass violence in visual excess. The animal visual metaphors suggest a lack of rationality, bestiality, and human condition during the massacre. The visual excess or repetition in mass violence depiction aims to unsettle the viewer and cause them to rethink the massacre. The artists chose direct and realistic representations of mass and sexual violence to avoid similar massacres happening again in the future.

Fifth, this study also indicates that the 1965–1966 massacre images in Indonesia always transform into other media, despite the Indonesian state’s banning of the victim narrative. This transformation suits biopicture theory, which underlines images’ ability to multiply and transform.

Sixth, another study result is that *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* belongs to the “expanded” or “enhanced” picture book, in which the visual narrative supports the verbal narrative. In this book, the visual narrative has many functions related to the text, such as providing an overview of the setting, developing characters, depicting details of the textual narrative, supporting textual coherence, and reinforcing the text’s information.

As a textual picture or pictorial dimension in text, *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners* is an ekphrasis that gives “voice to survivor’s experience.” The artists listen to the victims’ stories and manifest them in mixed media art. As pictorial text or textual dimension in the picture, this picture book artifact locates the textual narrative both in the preface and in the captions to reinforce this work’s historical and sociopolitical veracity.

Seventh, the graphic narrative employs the “image against image” strategy in which the victim narrative’s images oppose the master narrative’s images. The victim narrative offers new interpretations, especially regarding the mastermind of the massacre, the killing of seven generals, Sukarno’s transfer of power to Suharto, that which triggered the massacre, and the consequence of the massacre.

Eighth, virtual space can present a new opportunity for Indonesian social commentary comics, including *The History of the Indonesian Left Movement for Beginners*. The internet allows users to openly discuss and construct the collective memory of the 1965–1966 massacre, without the government’s intervention.

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