

Recent Experiment and Emerging Works at the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak – The Integration and an Experiment of a Traditional *Wayang Kulit* Performances and Electroacoustic Music

By

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Communal, participative and lively performing qualities have always been amongst the prominent features of Malaysian folk tradition, such example can be seen in the *wayang kulit* performances where the integration of ‘picture recitation and performance’ as well as the ability to deploy a combination of a well-trained musical skill with sufficient creative improvisation and spontaneity.

This paper will discuss about a multi-media research project established since 1996 until present at the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, and some issues on terminology and practice related to the creative multi-media experiments.

Keywords : *Electroacoustic Music, Multi-media*

Introduction

In ancient times, , among many entertainment activities, the *wayang kulit* or puppet shadow play was among that most popular form of entertainment (Sheppard, 1986). During in its early days, it was performed by a group of puppeteers who will move from one place to another together with a group of musicians. The word *wayang*, according to Sheppard (1986) are referring to the word *bayang* the Malay word for shadow, meanwhile *kulit* known as skin.

During the performance, the puppeteer will act as the story teller or also known as *tok dalang* who will manipulate the figure or *patung* by gliding the figures between the hanging lamp and the screen and at the same time will speak all the parts, and changes his voice to suit each character with occasionally adds a short song sequence (Sheppard 1986). During his presentation he will also be accompanied by musicians playing traditional musical instruments, such as *serunai, geduk, gendang, gedombak, tawak-tawak, chanang* and *kesi*. The *tok dalang* will act as the conductor and signals the musicians when to start and or stop.

It was estimated that this form of entertainment have existed in Asia more than fifteen hundred years (Sheppard, 1986).

Music and dance as noted by Brandon (1967), are indivisible companions of most performing art in Southeast Asia. Music in Asian tradition as a whole as described by Brandon (1967), has two major dramatic functions in the theatre. It accompanies singing or chanting as well as stage action (Brandon, 1967).

One of the most interesting characteristics of Southeast Asian musical theatre, as suggested by Brandon (1967) is that certain music or sounds are used repeatedly. Often specific meanings are attached to them, this example can be heard on *wayang kulit* performance and can be found such as in the fighting scene or during accompanying the character before leaving the scene (Brandon, 1967).

Sounds in *wayang kulit* fulfill a variety of functions merely to convey meaning or emotion to support what are shown on screen in which later will give great impact to the audience. During the performance of *wayang kulit*, the musicians are placed behind the *kelir* (white cotton screen) together with the *dalang* who will act as the conductor to the musicians. It is also believed that *wayang kulit* are among the oldest form of performing art in Malaysia and that can be recognized as a form of multimedia entertainment.

Sound heard source unseen from *Wayang Kulit* Perspectives.

The theatre or *panggung* where the *wayang* is performed are among important features in presenting *wayang kulit*. In the traditional *wayang kulit*, puppets were manipulated from behind a white cotton screen known as *kelir*. The *dalang* will later move them slowly in front of a hanging lamp and create a shadow on the screen. Perhaps these could be one of the earliest forms of 'back projection' as what we have on LCD projectors nowadays.

According to Sheppard (1986), the shadows are casted on the screen. A *pelita* (a small portable lamp with a tiny cotton submerged in a can of kerosene) will act as the light, meanwhile, the *kelir* or a white cotton screen were stretched, vertically to cover the front stage from side to side and from floor to a covered height (Sheppard, 1986). Between the screen and the *dalang*, freshly cut stems of a banana tree are laid parallel and served as the base where spines of the puppets are inserted.



Diagram a. The *wayang kulit Kelantan* performance, (Rahman, 1996)

During the performance, the *dalang* will manipulate all figures, speak all the parts and change his voice to suit each character (Sheppard, 1986), and occasionally insert narrative.

The “Wayang Virtual”.

In 1996, under Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, (Unimas) short-term grant, a research project known as ‘Wayang Virtual’, was established. The research in general, was inspired by the tradition of story telling using pictures in the Southeast Asia originally known as the shadow play or traditional *wayang kulit*.

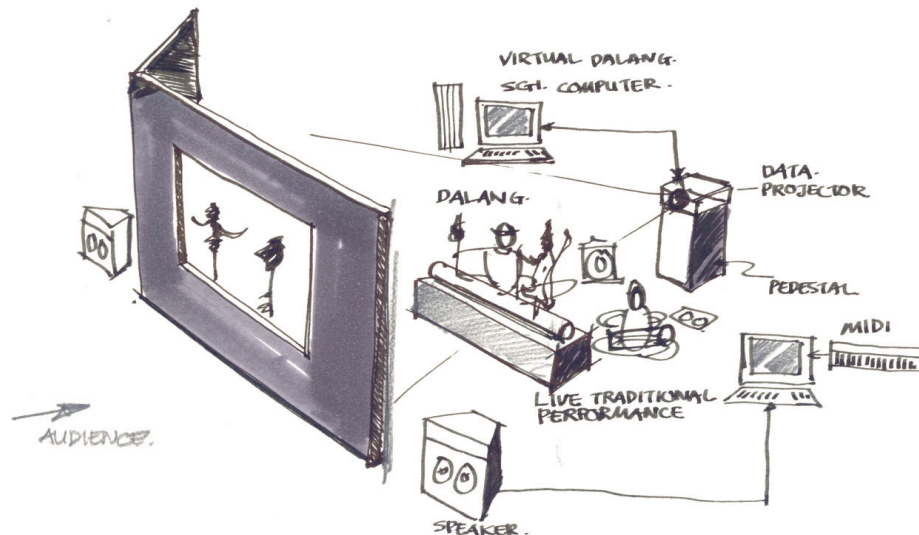


Diagram b. The layout of *Wayang* Virtual performance as illustrated by Rahman (1996).

This project attempts to experiment, exploring and combining traditional *wayang kulit* with the 3D model using IRIS showcase running on Silicon Graphic software, real time Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) performance and traditional *wayang kulit* as well as traditional music live performance.

The 'virtual' version of the traditional puppet or 'shadow' are combine together with a 3D animated figure and control by the *dalang* using a mouse on SGI machine and later projected to the white screen. *Wayang* virtual retained many of *wayang kulit* originality including the usage of traditional puppets, live traditional musics performances and the narrative aspects.

During the performance of *wayang* virtual, the sources of light from a LCD projector were used to illuminates the interaction of a three dimensional model with traditional *wayang kulit*, and unlike the traditional *wayang kulit*, two *dalangs* were used in *wayang virtual* to manipulate shadows and a three-dimensional model.

This project has successfully combined arts and multimedia technology and at the same time preserving Malaysian culture and identity, as well as viewing technology from our local perspectives, *wayang* virtual was presented to the public at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in 1997, and gained positive responses from the general public.

Wayang virtual was an experiment version of traditional *wayang kulit* from the technological perspectives.

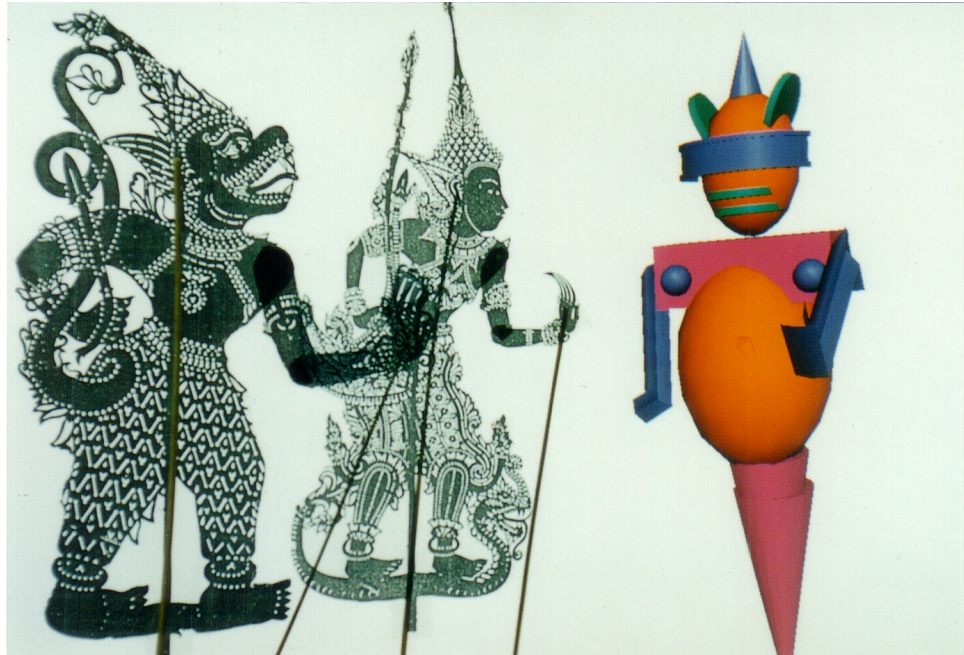


Diagram c. Wayang Virtual visual capture by Rahman (1996)

Acousmatic and the Traditional *Wayang Kulit*

The word ‘acousmatic’ which originate from the Greek philosopher, Pythagoras has been the focal point of discussion in electroacoustic music. The terminology ‘acousmatic’, or ‘listening to a speech behind the curtain’, as what was elaborated by many electroacoustic music composers would be something of yet to be explored in Malaysian cultural context. In contrast the notion of ‘listening to a speech behind the curtain’ is actually have already being explored in the *wayang kulit* performance, through the musicians who sat behind the *kelir* during the presentation. I would like to define *wayang kulit* as a medium of ‘acousmatic media’¹. This is because the practice of sounds which came from the unseen source has been long established and have been the performing practice since it was known presented to the public.

¹ A term used by Wikipedia (online encyclopedia) in discussing the relationship between media such as radio, phonograph and telephone. Those media according to Wikipedia ‘.....transmits sound without showing the source cause’. See – <http://en.wikipedia.org/wik/Acousmatic>.

'Outdoor staging' are the most known staging technique in presenting *wayang kulit* to the public. Unlike other traditional performances, in *wayang kulit*, the musicians and 'dalang' will perform their task behind the *kelir*. A light from coconut-oil lamps or kerosene during the performance are used as the light which form the back projection technique which will generate a shadow for the audience during the play.

I would also like to note *wayang kulit* as our earliest form of 'multimedia' presentation. The usage of white screen and 'back-projection' technique during the performance of *wayang kulit* might be the best example in this context. It was not until early 20th century that other mass media such as television, radio, motion picture, and other forms of modern communications including visual projection, come into place, and later compete with our traditional live theatres. It is here we found the roots of a multimedia tradition of our own. In fact, Malaysians who are accustomed in using notebooks with the aid of PowerPoint projections should realize that *wayang kulit* are the most primitive form of multimedia.

Present and Future Research

Research have already being established to look further into the aspect of sounding materials, definition and terminology in *wayang kulit* performance. As well as to explore further the relationship between visual and sonic parameter that, governed by modes of live interactive and real-time story telling in our traditional 'picture recitation'.

Wayang virtual had shown the exploration sounds of instruments from both the traditional *wayang kulit* and technological perspectives and at present the research focused in two areas namely towards a Real-time Interactive platform for the wayang kulit performances through Max/MSP programming languages and the diffusion of sound from *wayang kulit* performances in 3D.

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Note

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