

Shadow on Screen: The *Wayang Kulit* in *The Year of Living Dangerously*

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Christopher Koch's fiction often engages with Asia on various levels. The most extended and obvious example of this is his use of the *wayang kulit*, the Javanese shadow-puppet play, in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1979). On a surface level, the *wayang* in Koch's novel is a type of "local colour", an exoticised backdrop for a nineteenth-century style adventure fiction that narrates the exploits of privileged, Western male characters. Beneath this, the *wayang* allows Koch to depict a crucial historical moment in the history of Indonesia and to raise the spectres of illusion, dream, myth and propaganda which haunted 1965, the final year of Sukarno's regime. The *wayang* also serves as a structuring device for the novel's characterisation: the central characters are depicted as reflections of stock *wayang* figures, and Koch even deploys this to reflect on the novel's own characterisation and stereotyping. Finally, the *wayang* is crucial to the novel's post-colonial concerns: it raises the issue of abuse of power within colonial and post-colonial societies, and in particular suggests the complicity of the West and its agents in the continuing tragedy of violent conflict in Indonesia.

Hena Maes-Jelinek discusses the use of the *wayang* as a basis for Koch's mythologisation in the novel, arguing that it has a mythological framework which gives voice to neglected historical actors. Koch is clearly mythologising confrontation and conflict in Sukarno's Indonesia, but he also mythologises the role of Western journalists through the lens of Hindu myth. Felicia Campbell also explores the *wayang* in *The Year of Living Dangerously* to structure a broad plot summary with some consideration of both the novel and the film versions. While Campbell and Maes-Jelinik acknowledge the importance of the *wayang* in the novel, neither of them explore the multifaceted significance of it.

Clearly, the *wayang* does have differing roles in the novel and the film of *The Year of Living Dangerously*. These two forms use a different kind of screen: the film employs the screen as a receiver or transmitter of visual images, but the novel uses language and generic conventions as a screen which transmits the narrative. Peter Weir draws out the Hollywood elements in the

narrative: the film emphasises the romance between Hamilton and Jill and the excitement and danger of large crowds at the expense of the metaphysical and cross-cultural concerns which are central to Koch's novel. Put simply, the film uses more stock characterisation and stereotyping than the novel. These differences were eloquently summarised by Paul Sharrad in 1985:

It is interesting, not to say disturbing, that recent Australian films dealing with Asia have continued to project a "Boy's Own" adventure view of white relations with the region. In Weir's version of *The Year of Living Dangerously* respect for local culture is sacrificed for pragmatic considerations, self-examination is thrown overboard for unreflective romance, and Billy Kwan loses much of his background so that he seems like an exotic rootless species come from nowhere. Australian audiences are given nothing to think about, and are fed images that insinuate the same message that we find in the Indiana Jones movies. At least *they* were intended as satire! (Sharrad 68)

Nonetheless, the screen version of the narrative draws attention to the central role of vision, seeing and gazing in the story. On one level the *wayang* raises issues of form in the narrative, and especially the ways in which the novel can incorporate local traditions and forms of entertainment. Koch incorporates material from outside his own culture for specific purposes, to which we shall return.

The *wayang kulit* is a central aspect of Javanese culture. *Wayang* means theatre, and *kulit* means hide or leather, with reference to the material used in the production of the shadow puppets. The puppets are manipulated directly behind a screen facing the audience, and are traditionally lit from behind by an oil lamp, although contemporary *wayang* tends to use electric lighting. The puppets are manipulated by the *dalang*, or puppeteer, who takes a semi-divine role in narrating the action. The theatre is given life by a *gamelan* orchestra, and so the entire *wayang* uses the trappings of traditional Javanese culture.

Indeed, the structure of a *wayang* performance is based on the musical structure of the *gamelan*. Maes-Jelinik suggests that the tripartite structure of *wayang* can best be considered as a "musical scale with psychological overtones" (31). This structure is adopted by Koch wholesale and provides the title for the three parts of his novel: *Patet Nem* tells of the foolishness of youth; *Patet Sanga* tells of middle age where the protagonist seeks the right path; and *Patet Manjura* tells of old age, or climax and resolution. This is precisely the journey which Guy Hamilton undertakes in the novel, and the journey that the novel itself takes.

Like the novel, the *wayang* is a popular form—the entire community gathers to watch the performance throughout the entire night, and performances are often put on for major celebrations such as weddings. The performance is very informal: snacks and drinks are sold at the edges of the crowd, and the diverse audience often talks amongst themselves and will come and go throughout the night. The *wayang* is a crucial part of Javanese community life—it is part of the texture of the village. The audience members are allowed to watch the performance from either side of the screen: the *dalang*'s side (if they want to observe the mechanics of divine narrative) or from behind the screen, if they wish to preserve the magic and illusion of the performance. This aligns precisely with Koch's concerns with illusion, perception and "seeing".

These popular aspects of the *wayang* reflect on Koch's own favoured form: the novel. The *wayang* is traditionally based on the great myths told in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and so tells of the god Krisna and the mortal prince Arjuna, among others. Similarly, Koch bases his novels on popular literary precedents: adventure fiction from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, in both cases the form is not inflexible: while the *wayang* adapts Hindu myth, Koch also can be said to be writing critical adventures in the vein of Joseph Conrad or, for example, William Golding in his *Lord of the Flies*. Graham Dawson has argued that adventure "can be detached from the sexist and imperialist imaginings with which it has so long been associated, and articulated instead to progressive principles which also enjoy popular resonance" (290). Although Koch cannot be labelled "progressive" quite so simply, his novels do "use the geography of adventure stories as a point of departure to get somewhere new, to invent new stories and construct new geographies and identities, to write new literatures" (Phillips 160). In doing so Koch draws on an established tradition of appropriating the *wayang* for various social and political purposes.

Chris Hilton's documentary, *Shadow Play: Indonesia's Years of Living Dangerously* focuses on the various appropriations of the *wayang*. For instance, when Hinduism entered Java it used ancient indigenous forms of theatre to narrate its canonical stories. Islam and Christianity have also sought to use *wayang* to give expression to its core narratives, with mixed success. *Shadow Play* explores how the *wayang* has been used for political purposes, as well as the extent to which Western powers were complicit in the anti-Communist purges following Sukarno's fall. Using Linda Hunt (who portrayed Kwan in Weir's film) as a narrator invites reference to the film version of the story and reinforces Koch's exploration of Western complicity in the tragedy of Indonesia, using the *wayang* as a referent in a documentary genre.

The Year of Living Dangerously may even be considered a *wayang* novel, a hybrid or synthesis of the two forms. Koch does this self-consciously: his narrator Cook (an English translation of the German name Koch) is absent from the film but is absolutely central to the novel. The novel's events are filtered through his consciousness and memory as he reconstructs what happened with the benefit of hindsight. Cookie identifies himself as a *dalang*: "I whisper the invocation of the Javanese *dalang*, the master of the shadow show: 'May silence prevail: may the strength of wind and storm be mine'" (87). While obviously drawing on the Javanese tradition, this also echoes the invocation of the Muse in Epic poetry. As such, it is the type of formal hybridity which is characteristic of much post-colonial fiction. It also echoes the narrative distance typical of Conrad's fiction which problematises any simple identification of narrative voice and author.

While these considerations of form are interesting, Koch's use of the *wayang* is much more than a mere technical flourish. At a first glance it may seem that the *wayang* serves to give some local colour to an adventure fiction in a conventional generic mode. This reading would see the *wayang* as a bit of decoration, like the garish *wayang* figures painted all over the *betjaks* on the streets of New Jakarta (17). Indeed, this type of depiction is, as might be expected, emphasised in Guy's first night in Indonesia, when the sensory experience of being in Asia presses on him most fully.

Most of us, I suppose, become children again when we enter the slums of Asia. We re-discover there childhood's opposite intensities: the gimcrack and the queer mixed with the grim; laughter and misery; carnal nakedness and threadbare nakedness; fear and toys. This was now happening to Hamilton, who found that the puzzling clove-and-nutmeg scent, like the smell of the heat itself, had intensified; it suddenly became very important to know what it was. (20)

The emphasis here is on Hamilton's vision as mediated by Cookie: his "Imperial Eyes" which, along with his other senses, filter his experience. Hamilton's first impression drives him to *know*: he needs to identify the smell of Jakarta. This suggests his feeling of disempowerment and loss at being in a strange place and his desire to regain knowledge and his sense of place in the world. It also evokes a kind of knowledge/power nexus which we shall return to. On the one hand, this passage may seem to be replicating the blatant Orientalism of an earlier generation of adventure fiction. However, any reader must take into account the crucial distinction between narrator, character and author: it is no easier to identify Hamilton with Koch than it is to identify Marlow with Conrad. In the film version the distinction is harder to maintain.

This Orientalist representation of place is emphasised in the film, which evokes a strong scent of the exotic. Here Indonesia is more obviously a backdrop for the exploits and adventures of the Western characters, and it has no independent life separate from the perceptions of the West. In the film the various layers of significance in the *wayang* are diminished as the large crowds of unruly Indonesians and sweeping images of the Javanese landscape fill out the *mise-en-scène*. The novel presents an entirely different case. In Koch's novel the *wayang* operates as a central structuring principle. It is a key to the novel's texture: informed by his own experience, Koch is well aware of its multiple purposes, as he explained to John Thieme:

The *wayang* was an experience that I first had in a very superficial way, as most Westerners do. You pass them at night on the road-side and you see the lit screen in the dark and you go to the edge of the crowd and you watch for a while, but it's all in Old Javanese and it means nothing to you. But it came back to me in a rather haunting way many years later, and then I read a marvellous book on the *wayang*, *On Thrones of Gold* by a scholar called James Brandon. That was a wonderful source, and I became more and more interested in the way that by sheer luck the symbolic patterns and morality play of the *wayang* paralleled some of the patterns in my novel. That's the sort of bonus that sometimes happens and which you don't plan for. (24)

So for Koch, if not for Weir, the *wayang* is much more than local colour—it is central to the narrative. Most obviously it is used to portray the historical moment in the final months of Sukarno's Year of Living Dangerously. In the novel, Sukarno himself uses the *wayang* in his audiences, and puts on performances whereby his ministers are unmistakably characterised and their fall is foreshadowed—in this way they know their career is over (52). More significantly, however, the *wayang* shapes the depiction of the fundamental political conflict within the nation. In the countryside, towards the end of the novel, “the *wayang* of the Left were everywhere triumphant” (195). As the novel reaches its tragic and excruciating climax, the *wayang* becomes more and more prominent in the narrative.

Even as the Bung disappeared from the platform, the *Wayang* of the Left were gathering their forces in secret out at Halim [. . .] Their combined fighting force was divided into three sections, and code-named after characters in the *wayang kulit* [. . .] One of these [had a mission] to kidnap and murder the most important *Wayang* of the Right; Indonesia's top Army generals. (268-9)

Thus the *wayang* structures the conflicts and divisions throughout Sukarno's Indonesia between the Left and the Right, the communist and the capitalist, the atheist and the Muslim. Another division is between the *kasar* and the

alus. *Kasar* translates loosely as coarse, or uncultivated: it is associated with foreigners who are loud and brash, with no respect for local customs. On the other hand, *alus* characters in the *wayang* are noble and cultivated: they are associated with the Javanese *priyayi* class, and have their eyes downcast in keeping with social protocol.

As well as encouraging metaphysical reflections in the novel, the *kasar/alus* division serves to emphasise the role of the brash, coarse Western journalists. The two security men at the end of the novel are split into these categories: the Hindu one is refined and quiet; the Malay is rough and coarse. This is clearly a form of stereotyping which may at first seem xenophobic. Koch is more concerned, though, with drawing attention to the processes of division and exclusion than simply buttressing the stereotypes which result from them. The two security men are too obviously stock characters for their stereotyping to be normalised. The most important of these stock figures is the *wayang* characterisation in the end of the novel: Koch depicts General Suharto, the Muslim Army's saviour as "the drama's *alus* hero, and the country's new prince" (276). Given the benefit of hindsight, the narrative is clearly deploying these characterisations with a certain degree of irony. The heavily mediated nature of the narrative is the most obvious clue.

Indeed, the *wayang* forms the basis for much of the characterisation in *The Year of Living Dangerously*. The main characters in the novel embody *wayang* figures: on the screen the shadows are the souls of the figures, and the novel is centrally concerned with the essence and motivations of its characters. Hamilton and Jill represent "the human shadows of some universal wish", and so the romance subplot between them is not superficial (103): it is archetypal. There are also more concrete identifications between *wayang* figures and the novel's characters, even though some of these correspondences are slippery or multilayered.

Sukarno is obviously the novel's great example of the fallen hero-leader. He is variously depicted as the *dalang*, the all-powerful and semi-divine puppet-master who does his best to balance the forces of Left and Right. However, he is also the *dukun*, or medicine man, attempting to hold together the body and soul of the nation. Billy Kwan's *wayang* characterisation is similarly divided: sometimes he is represented as Krisna, the divine friend and guide who offers moral instruction to Arjuna/Hamilton. At other times he is Semar, the patron of dwarves, a wise fool who is the only *wayang* figure allowed to question the *status quo* of society.

The romance plot between Hamilton and Jill is also represented according to the *wayang*. Hamilton is depicted as Prince Arjuna, the warrior hero whose greatest power is *sakti*, or spiritual power. Arjuna is guided on the battlefield by Krisna, a role which Billy adopts too zealously. Jill is likened to Princess Srikandi, one of Arjuna's wives known for her loyalty to family and country. In Hollywood or popular romance terms, she is the "female interest": an object of lust, desire, and perhaps a more wholesome type of love as well. She certainly does stand by her man, but only to a point—Hamilton eventually meets her halfway. Their unborn child at the end of the novel represents the consummation of their relationship and Hamilton's commitment to a future as a family man. Admittedly the central romance plot of the novel lacks closure, and Hamilton may well have not learnt his lesson thoroughly enough. What is clear is that he abandons his egocentric Asian adventure for a chance, at least, with Jill.

Just as the *wayang* does not simply depict a Cold War setting, it also does not merely serve to sketch outlines for the novel's major characters. It encourages reflections on the nature of characterisation itself, particularly its own depiction of some characters in two-dimensional terms. Kumar's "crude stereotypes of *Konfrontasi*" are examples of this (175): the narrative is carefully distanced from such attitudes. The depiction of Jill as Srikandi, the love interest of the novel, emphasises that in many ways she is actually stereotyped within the narrative. The emphasis on the description of her body when we are introduced to her is clearly from the perspective of the men around her, although the reader is certainly not encouraged to identify with those who gaze on her as such (45-6). The other main female character, Vera, is an even more self-consciously shadowy figure (186).

The male gaze which serves to objectify women is emphasised again and again in Koch's fiction and has provoked strong responses from some critics. For instance, McKernan's accusations of stereotyping in the novel were rather strident (432-9). Others have taken a more measured stance, arguing that "Asia' becomes the site of a Western and specifically first-world touristic nostalgia for the lost moment of hegemonic power in European history" (Nettelbeck 16). This may be true, but it is important not to confuse Christopher Koch with his literary creations.

At first glance it may seem that Koch's novels do adopt the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" attitude, the "view from the balcony" which Mary Louise Pratt identifies (216). In Koch's novel though, the balcony of the Hotel Indonesia is the place from which Billy Kwan plummets to his death: his position of privilege as a Westerner (albeit hybridised) sends him directly to his death.

For his part, Hamilton is a “hyphenated white male” as Pratt calls Paul Du Chaillu, Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad, writers who in various ways propound an “internal critique of empire” rather than acting as outright colonialists (213). Koch establishes a critical distance between himself and his narrator and protagonist, and portrays Hamilton as a “seeing-man”, the protagonist of an “anti-conquest”, “he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (Pratt 7). Koch is certainly familiar enough with adventure fiction to identify and portray such attitudes as being in need of serious correction. Such a reading sees his work as “rendering the expressive and representational function of the work problematical, by encouraging an inquisitiveness about the material nature of the means of representation” rather than being complicit with imperial attitudes (Roskies 40).

With a focus on vision, gazing and the “seer”, Koch often deploys these characterisations through specific types of male character or narrator: in *The Year of Living Dangerously* it is Cookie who illustrates Jill, and Hamilton and Billy who provide material for Cookie’s characterisation of her. The narrator depicts Jill as the only woman in an almost exclusively male domain: she is the object of sexual desire and the male gaze, and sometimes a leering, lascivious kind of desire which does not reflect well on the male characters. These men (particularly Kwan and Hamilton) see Jill as a passive object, a possession which needs to be guarded and protected. Nowhere in Koch’s fiction are these attitudes celebrated or condoned; indeed, they are the direct cause of destruction and trauma. In Koch’s fiction vision is rarely naturalised or unmediated: there is a focus on the act of gazing and the subject position of the “eye/I” who is doing it. The use of the *wayang* and the position of the audience in relation to the *dalang* and performance more generally serve to underscore this.

While some of the novel’s *wayang* characterisations may be deliberately flat and stereotyped, others, such as Billy, are very complex. Although Sukarno is the formal *dalang* in the narrative, Billy also sees himself as a type of *dalang*. Billy is a deeply afflicted character: he has the mind of a fully-grown man but is trapped in the body of a child. He is outcast from human society, both because of his stature and his deep idealism, and he is subject to jeering and taunts on both counts. The outcome of this is that he attempts to re-empower himself by keeping files on all the people he meets as well as public figures, concepts and ideologies. After meeting Hamilton, Billy starts a campaign to unite him with Jill which eventually leads to his spectacular and tragic decline. A fine example of this manipulation is near the beginning of the novel, where he attempts to make a couple of Hamilton and Jill by

convincing Hamilton to intercede on his behalf in a marriage proposal to Jill (105). However, it is the file-keeping which attracts the suspicion of the novel's main characters. This dysfunctional will to power becomes very clear when Billy reflects on his own status as *dalang*.

Here, on the quiet page I'm master—just as I'm master in the dark-room, stirring my prints in the magic developing-bath. And here, among my files, I can shuffle like cards the lives I deal with. Their faces stare out at me from these little pieces of glazed card: people who will betray other people, people who will become old, betray their dreams, become ghosts. But they wait, in my files, to see what I'll do with them. Charting their blind course on paper, I own them, in a way! They can lock me out of their hearts, dear Friend, but not out of their lives. They are tenants of my secret system, whether they like it or not. (108)

Billy's self-construction as a *dalang* implies much more than his individual derangement: it reflects on themes of power, exploitation and justice throughout the novel. Many of these relate to Sukarno himself. Sukarno's regime (and its concomitant vocal nationalism) is depicted as the expression of an ego out of control, suggested by his rhetoric, the monuments he builds, and not least his reputed sexual prowess. This is the corruption and moral failure which causes such a catastrophic disillusionment for Billy Kwan: he worshipped Sukarno as a hero and fully believed he would be the saviour of Indonesia. In the end Sukarno is just play-acting at being the *dalang*.

The social and economic problems experienced by ordinary Indonesians create dissatisfaction and friction in the countryside. This people-power, aided and abetted by PKI cadres, builds up to a frenetic volume and unleashes itself in marches and demonstrations which move towards violent insurrection. This is the climax to the novel's *wayang* narrative, when Hamilton finds himself in danger, and it is these scenes with their images of angry crowds of Indonesians venting their spleen which are so memorable in the film.

These examples of power and exploitation are all related in terms of the *wayang kulit*. They are most concretely raised in the general context of the Wayang Club, the bar of the International Hotel which is the regular haunt of the Western journalists. The Hotel itself is like a world apart, a place of privilege for everyone but the ordinary Indonesians who suffer daily deprivations. It is precisely the position of privilege that Mary Louise Pratt identifies.

The fourteen-storey Hotel Indonesia (always with a capital H) rode like a luxury ship in mid-ocean, being at this time the only one of its kind in the whole country [. . .] Paid for by the Japanese, managed by the Americans, it had its own power (since Jakarta's was fast failing);

its own purified water (since Jakarta's now carried infections); its own frigid air, which no other hotel could offer [. . .] it was a world complete. (15)

The Wayang Club itself is even further removed from the real world: it is dimly lit and decorated with various *wayang* figures to enhance the effect of Otherworldliness. The Western journalists who patronise the Club are clearly privileged in all sorts of ways: Koch contrasts their air-conditioned comfort with the poverty and degradation of the *kampongs*, or shanties, of Jakarta. The camaraderie between the men echoes the type of male bonding we see in the Boys' Own adventure fictions of the nineteenth century.

The power and position of privilege of these men is apparent. Like *wayang* figures, they are representatives of another world, one where power and plenty are the norm. Each one of them has his own weaknesses and foibles which are certainly not condoned within the narrative. Condon is reasonably honest and noble, but he is addicted to taking photos of topless females among the poor. Curtis (who seems to be derived from Conrad's Kurtz) is constantly visiting the cemetery to make use of the many prostitutes forced into their profession by economic need. Wally O'Sullivan is the patriarch of the men, and he has a predilection for young Indonesian boys—he is eventually betrayed by an angry, disappointed Kwan and ejected from the country. Given the doubtful morality of these men the reader is forced to wonder at Hamilton's own position.

To begin with Hamilton is a noble, moral figure: this is why Kwan becomes attached to him and designates him a suitable life-partner for Jill. However, we eventually come to realise that Hamilton is not perfect: he is afraid to commit himself to a relationship and uses his career in order to distance himself from loved ones. Furthermore, his actual presence in Indonesia is open to question: at one point he offers money to Kumar to help his family, claiming that he makes more than enough from the black market in currency (167). Ultimately, Hamilton is complicit in the events leading up to the end of the novel.

Aside from the men using the Wayang Club as a regular haunt, the issues of form alluded to earlier reinforce Koch's exploration of power and exploitation. Just like the *wayang*, Koch's novel emphasises the important role of vision and seeing. The *wayang* is a visual medium, and the Western journalists and photographers (especially Condon and Billy) are spectators looking onto the unfolding Indonesian drama. Hamilton is there to further his career; despite his generally noble nature his presence in Indonesia is fundamentally self-interested. He is taking advantage of the poverty and conflict in the country

to further his own interests—this is clearest when he uses Jill’s information about the arms shipment to get a scoop, or his more regular employment of Billy as his “eyes” in Jakarta.

It is Hamilton’s power of vision, his ability to see and to know what is going on in the country which supports his privileged position. Billy may well be a “Peeping Tom on life” (107), but later he projects this judgement and castigates Hamilton for being a Peeping Tom (237). This is emphasised at the end of the novel when Hamilton is, poignantly, blinded as a result of his own naïveté and arrogance: “He was a watcher, a watcher merely, as Billy had said. And Peeping Tom had lost an eye” (289). This is the most obvious way that Koch draws attention to the processes of stereotyping and representation rather than merely representing stereotypes from the past. Through losing his power of vision Hamilton is utterly disabled, and the associated moral imperatives are poignantly illustrated when he is visited by Kumar, who pricks his conscience when Hamilton objects to the militant policy of the PKI:

“Their deaths may shock you, but of course you are very concerned about the taking of life. To me there are worse things. Continuing misery is worse. The misuse of this country’s wealth has caused misery of which you really know nothing. But you don’t have to care. You can go to another country, and write other stories there.” (288)

This suggests that Hamilton’s conscience is a luxury he can afford because his people do not starve and suffer under systematic injustice. These questions of exploitation and the role of the Western journalists in Indonesia are related more deeply to Koch’s use of the *wayang*. As an onlooker to the unfolding drama in Indonesia, Hamilton occupies a privileged position, precisely because of his “seeing-man” status. This function of the *wayang* is the major, and most sophisticated, social comment in the novel: the fate of Indonesia lies at the feet of not just a corrupt nationalist dictatorship but also the Western powers represented by Hamilton, Kwan, and the others.

For Koch the *wayang* is neither simply a piece of local colour nor a resource to be appropriated and deployed in a Eurocentric manner. It is related to the philosophical issues of illusion and perception reflected in the concept of Plato’s cave, which resonate through Koch’s work (Koch, “Literature”). Hamilton’s viewing of a *wayang* show in the countryside suggests that the screen is a portal to the Otherworld and produces a realm of illusion which is fundamentally ambiguous. Koch makes this explicit in Hamilton’s response:

At eight years old, in hospital with appendicitis, he had been alarmed by the noises of the ward at night: agonized coughing, groans, distant

crashes. And he had hidden behind comic books his older brother had brought him, erecting them on his chest like screens between himself and the unthinkable landscape beyond his bed. He had not wanted to hear the coughing of the old man dying in the bed next to him; he had not wanted to smell his bedpan, or hear the bubbling of his bowels. And there came back to him the peculiar affection he had felt for those little figures in the comic books which could make him forget what lay beyond their pages. He had followed Mickey Mouse and Tarzan and the Phantom from frame to frame (as he now followed the darting figures in the lit frame of the *wayang*) with mysterious pleasure, but without comprehension, whispering like runes the phrases they spoke. And it occurred to him now, Hamilton said, that the *wayang* frame was perhaps created here for the same reason that he had propped his comic-book screen on his chest: so that the people of the kampong could forget, for a whole night, the presences of hunger and pain and threat at the edges of their green world. (202-3)

This long passage is crucial to Koch's understanding of the *wayang* and his artistic vision generally. It suggests the cross-cultural awareness of his work: rather than seeing a simply alien art form in the Indonesian puppets, Hamilton is able to translate it into his own reading experience as a child. On the one hand, reading or viewing such a narrative is a simple form of escapism, a vehicle to escape from the reality of a hospital ward or an underdeveloped Indonesia. However, it does also have higher purposes: through contact with and a brief visit to the Otherworld, the viewer/reader has a more exalted sense of humanity and a heightened spiritual awareness.

Indeed, the world of narrative (here represented in the diegetic space of the *wayang*) is an Otherworld entirely. The theme of parallel realities is ubiquitous in Koch's work, as identified in critical studies by Noel Henricksen and Jean-Francois Vernay. Koch's Otherworlds often have a strong Celtic flavour, but here Koch "emphasizes the parallels between Indonesian and Celtic mythologies and gives them universal meaning" (Maes-Jelinek 30). In the Otherworld of the *wayang* all of Koch's concerns regarding post-colonial, second-hand culture, characterisation, conflict, and the forces of history and politics, are played out.

Here the shadow-play is not simply an entry to another world inhabited by mythic figures of whom we are simply avatars: it is both a way to understand the world and temporarily escape from the pain and tragedy which it contains for so many people. This is a profoundly metaphysical realisation which is central to the deep structures of *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

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