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How “Pahit Manis, Night Forest” Based on Batuan Paintings and “K-Pop Demon Hunters” are Related: Ancestral Stories Retold in Contemporary Time

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ABSTRACT

Our understanding of myths and noble wisdom in the Asia-Oceania civilisation has been side eyed by many scholars due to colonialism. For many years our collective polycentric aesthetics views (Shohat and Stam, 1998) in understanding how the world works are seen just as mere imaginary stories. Our ancestors constructed stories for better lives in the future, unfortunately distracted from colonialism to globalisation. In recent years there have been many efforts building back these myths and memories, re-introduced to today’s world so that younger generations can learn from. One way that has been done is through video installations and films. To note there will be two, what seemed opposite art films, yet actually are very related that will be discussed here. First, is a short film by Australian-Balinese artist, Leyla Stevens, “Pahit Manis, Night Forest” presented in an installative exhibition. “Pahit Manis” is a reintroduction to what’s once Mead and Bateson’s Batuan paintings’ collections and its familiar Tantri stories at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The film eventually travelled to Bali to be shown to Batuan painters and families of the paintings represented, along in Potato Head and recent ARMA Fest. Second, is a very popular full-length movie titled K-Pop Demon Hunters, telling the story of a South Korean girl band that fights demons and protects the world from them. The details of myths and memories brought up are intriguingly symbolised. Within these stories are effects of colonialism, indigenous stories, and most importantly these ancestral stories retold in a contemporary time.

KEYWORDS

Batuan Paintings, Film, Daemons, Ancestral, Contemporary

Introduction: Film as a Bridge to Side Eyed Aesthetics

Film in its entity is an audio visual artwork. In recent years, films from different sides of the world emerge more and more with the help of online streaming platforms. Animation films, in particular, with its developing digital tools, made it possible to create further detailing especially on intricate character visuals known to be found in Asia. Other than mainstream published films, there are also those presented as an artwork in a gallery. Interestingly, both ways of presenting films have managed to retell ancestral stories in contemporary time to a wider and younger global audience, including stories from Asia-Oceania.

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Ancestral stories in the Asia-Oceania part of the world have been side-eyed by many scholars due to colonialism. Orientalism by Edward Said [1] originally published 1978 is one of the vital texts that have created a turning point towards the readings of European nations feeling superior in their time - that they feel the most righteous, and "Others" are not, creating further discrimination, racism, fetishism, and eventually colonialism by ruling countries across the globe. Creating "collections" and "markets" of their own, cultural objects ending up in museums of their nations, as if not all culture and stories are equally accepted worldwide.

From then postcolonialism existed, as "it claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being" from the "division between the rest and the west". For that 'postcolonial theory' is stated to have involved "a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledges, as well as needs, developed outside the west" and that it is not a single entity [2]. The current decolonisation word that we know today also comes from the same ideas as postcolonialism, where postcolonialism comes from South Asia and decolonisation comes from South America, which both "seek to undermine the idea that modernity emerged from Europe as a result of internal European factors" [3]. Interestingly, decolonisation is priorly used nowadays due to its translation as a practice detaching ourselves from who once colonised us, furthermore from those who tried to practice colonialism in different forms of economies towards its own people in its regions.

Through postcolonialism and decolonisation, further deconstructions and knowledge production were revealed, including in aesthetics as an important theory in the visual culture (which is an extension of art history in itself). One of them being Shohat and Stam's [4] polycentric aesthetics views that reintroduced perspectives that seem to be denied by the Eurocentrist or western world, in which "Africa, Latin America and Asia as 'underdeveloped' or 'developing'" and that of the third world, which emerged through the Asian African Conference in Bandung year 1955, only seen as a "toddler" still "learning" due to its position gaining independence after colonialism and imperialism. To them non-European aesthetics "bypass the formal conventions of dramatic realism" such as through "carnivalesque" and "magical realist" filled with "other historical rhythms, other narrative structures, other views of body, sexuality, spirituality and the collective life".

With Shohat and Stam's [4] examples in this reading coming from films created with a variety of non-European aesthetics all over Asia, Africa and Latin America, "the visual" in any parts of the world never died, nor became extinct. The visuals "transform themselves, leaving traces and reminiscences" and being "an integral part of a culture and of history" thus a very strategic point of entry "into a multidimensional world of intertextual dialogism". Hence what was maybe stamped traditional never had an

ending story as “rethinking the global relationalities of artistic approach and reception” meaning “art is born between individual and communities and cultures”, with that “creation” comes from “between permeable, changing communities”. Therefore, “a polycentric approach…is a long-overdue gesture toward historical equity and lucidity, a way of re-envisioning the global politics of visual culture.”

With these trains of thoughts, we will be diving into two examples of art films that seemed opposite ends yet related, with one existing in a gallery setting titled “Pahit Manis, Night Forest” and one in an online streaming platform titled “K-Pop Demon Hunters”. These two art films have been part of the recent exhilarating efforts building back myths and memories to be re-introduced to the younger generations.

“Pahit Manis, Night Forest”: Storytelling as Preservation and Act of Survival

First we will dive into “Pahit Manis, Night Forest”. The work is created by Leyla Stevens [5], an Australian-Balinese research-led artist who works within a lens-based practice. Her works delved on counter histories within the dominant narratives, collaborating with places and communities, engaging with archives, cultural geographies and performances lineages. “Pahit Manis, Night Forest” is her most recent artwork exhibited at Art Gallery of New South Wales that involved existing Batuan Paintings and a film within an installative exhibition.

The exhibition [6] hopes to “guide conservation efforts” with pahit manis meaning bittersweet in Bahasa Indonesia it suggests “these are stories of both hope and lament at a time when our environment is under threat.” To Leyla, storytelling traditions can promote care for the natural and spirit worlds, including wayang kulit (shadow puppets) and Tantri tales (fables often feature animal protagonists) referred in a “group of pen-and-ink works on paper made in the villages of Batuan and Sanur during the 1930s-Bali’s late colonial period”. These are the materials included within the displays and the film she created filled with the animated version of the paintings, performance of a dalang (shadow puppet master), contemporary painting documentation, and soundtrack of field recordings from Bali’s last forest.

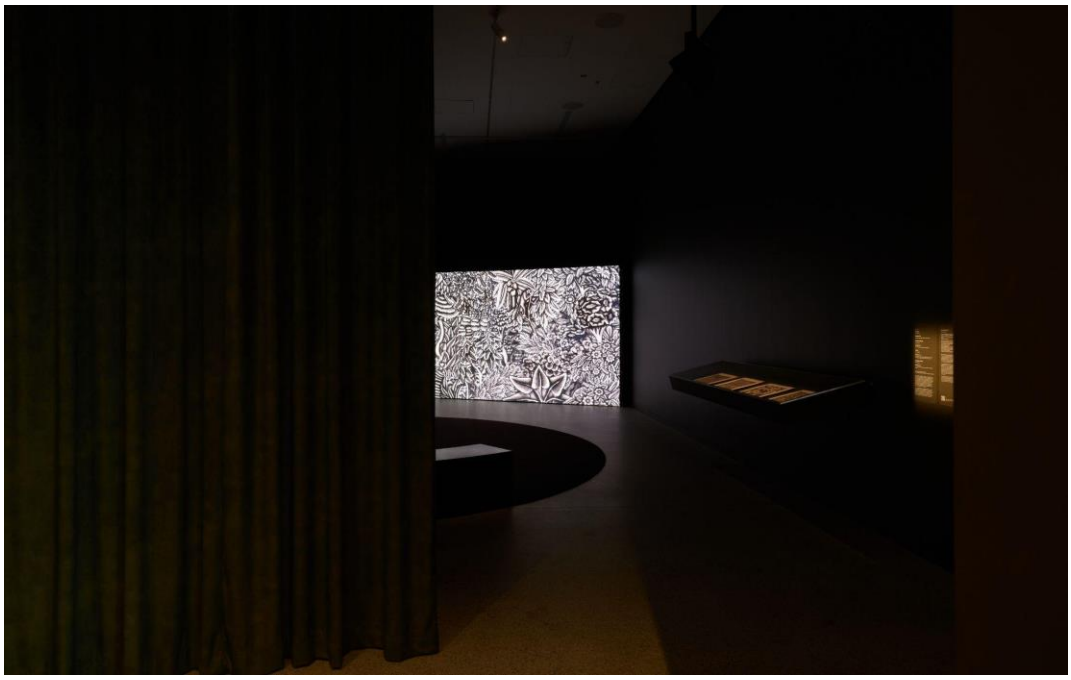

Image Credit: PAHIT MANIS, Night Forest, 2024 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales © Leyla Stevens, photo © Art Gallery of New South Wales, Felicity Jenkins.

It all started when Leyla encountered some of the Batuan Paintings almost four years ago at the Australian museum when she was researching for a different collection at the time. Leyla [7] started thinking how could these paintings that are “hidden away in collection drawers and have remained a niche academic subject” be reclaimed and reconnect to its stories. As we probably know, the paintings were once commissioned by the American anthropologist Margaret Mead and her partner Gregory Bateson where they “became interested in Balinese paintings” along with “their insights into rituals, folktales and dreams” and "commissioned villagers as well as artisans to make paintings” resulting 1000 more works, staying still as archives then spread to collections around the world.

As Leyla sees most of the paintings were Batuan style and knowingly is still a painting village, along with other four paintings from Sanur on display with the exhibition, she explained,

> The distinctive ‘Batuan style’ of painting is flattened and monochromatic with many gradients, lending to highly detailed supernatural or surreal scenes within the paintings made in both villages. For many of these painters, the works started a painting tradition within their families that continues today. Before this period, painting in Bali wasn’t done for aesthetic or commercial purposes. Paintings were on textiles hung in spaces for rituals or made for royalty. The painters’ interactions with Mead and Bateson, as well as other major European collectors, signalled the start of a commercialised form of art production in Bali. [7]

The works then are seen as “significant works culturally, socially, and artistically” as it “introduced new subject matter and painting genres”, leading to Leyla’s question: “How do you escape the reading of these works from a European framework?” One way she found is through getting permission from the original painters’ families,

> There are currently 14 to 16 families involved. In my discussions with them, the presence of Mead and Bateson was rarely mentioned, nor were Western artists who are often referenced as influences. Instead we mostly heard anecdotes like, ‘these are the stories my grandfather used to tell’ or ‘those are the stories we would tell during this ritual’.[7]

Therefore, she attempted to tell them in a combination of different materials and layers in telling what the past has told us within the contemporary lens of what’s happening today. Which Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran from The Art Show of ABC Australia Radio stated “Pahit Manis, Night Forest” is an "interconnected webs of song, performance, and environmental reverence” in which “deeply beautiful sequences of Balinese jungles are punctuated with the sonic intensity of cicadas and visions of shadow puppetry”.[8]

Through the interview with Ramesh, there were several important points discussed on how Leyla works as an artist with existing archives. First, Ramesh sees a significance in the four presented paintings in the exhibition, and Leyla explained that they are on loan from the Australian Museum to “give that sort of material context to these paintings so they were not always digitised", a material legacy and to get it exhibited as there were previous failure attempts to do so in an art history context.[8]

Image Credit: Leyla Stevens, still from PAHIT MANIS, Night Forest (2024), single channel film, 28 minutes.

Second, each pointed out how interesting that archives such as the Batuan and Sanur paintings could be presented in a contemporary art context - hence reconnected to our current contemporary lives. Ramesh sees “poetic and speculative dimensions” rather than “dry didactic models” which he sees as “a connecting thread” in Leyla’s works with nature, trees and landscapes being “layered and sentiment”. Leyla is heavily inspired by the “real deep understanding of the unseen forces of a place” known as *niskala*, which she further explained as “the sort of immaterial dimension of a place”. She understood that landmarks like trees, rocks, water sources are all “home of spirits and where the spirits are attracted to” which she connects to dealing with the “unseen” of the existing archives. She exclaimed what seemed to be a vital point in seeing her work that there is “a different way of reading those archives and those collections”. Other than that, Leyla’s “craft of sequences” layering many elements including imagery of trees and audio that recites *kidung* (sacred songs) about trees become her way of creating “mythic dimensions”. She further explained,

> …fundamental Balinese philosophies around the natural environment, there's a duty and responsibility to look after them because they are alive and they are attached to the spirit world and you have a duty to look after that. For me that’s a really interesting way to think about this sort of broader challenges of conservation and preservation today. That's a really powerful way. If you understand that these living structures are homes to spirits that you have to look after them. [8]

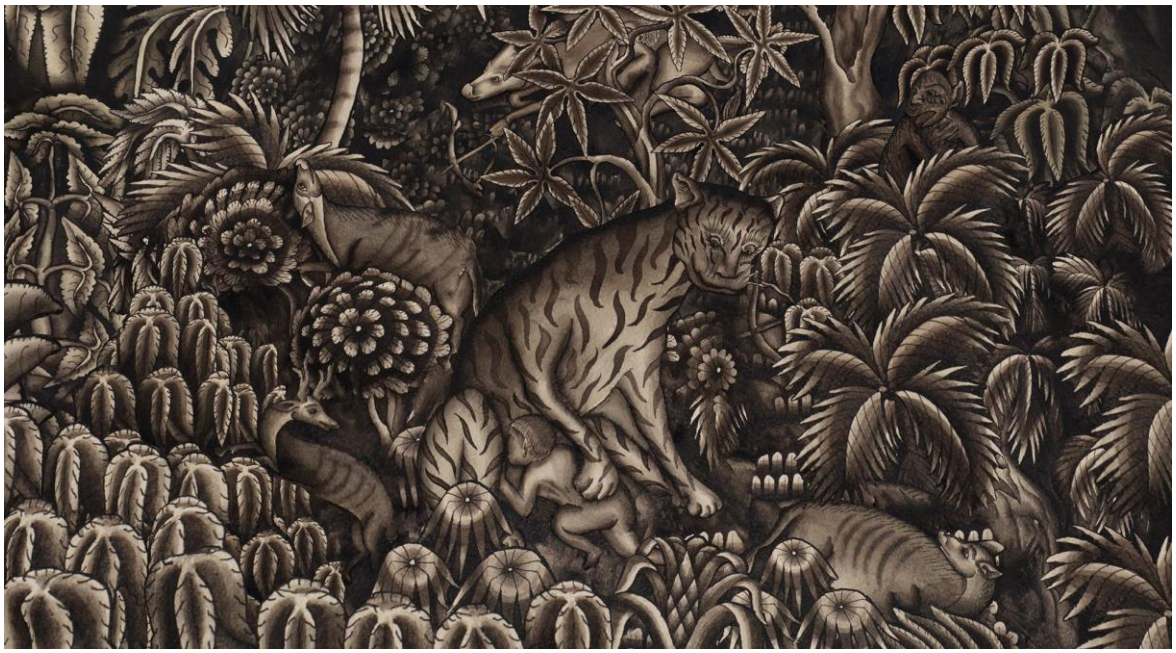

Image Credit: Leyla Stevens, animation still from *PAHIT MANIS, Night Forest* (2024), featuring painting by Dewa Nyoman Dadug Kayunan from the collection of R Lemelson (Ex-Mead-Bateson Collection)

In “Pahit Manis, Night Forest” it’s the first time Leyla [7] worked with animation which she worked with multimedia artist Tristan Jalleh. In order to show the hidden-in-

drawers Batuan and Sanur paintings, Leyla evolved them into animated materials "stitch together” while “depicting narratives from the Tantri stories” that “convey a moral lesson”. Tantri herself refuses to be the last concubine for the King to have so she tells continuous fables so that he could not seduce her. To Leyla, Tantri stories are fables that are “strange, little funny stories, that were folktales” told in “oral storytelling”, hence when cross checked with the Balinese, turns out not all remembered today. In representing Tantri as “the feminist survival”, in the film a female *dalang* performs a contemporary script “channeling the Macan Gading (White Tiger), who is the guardian spirit of the river” and goes into rage as their home is destroyed. There is also a documentation showing Made Griyawan, a contemporary painter from Batuan and descendant of one of the original painters from Mead and Bateson’s collection, with a voiceover based on the script of another original painter’s dream that was in Mead and Bateson’s psychological analysis notes. Meanwhile, the soundtrack had recordings of Bali’s last remaining old-growth forests in Jembrana as “this sonic element links past and future archives of forests in Bali”. Furthermore [8], the mythic dimension of gliding and sweeping into the forests, the sound design comes as “an archive” of a space that is facing "environment crisis mode in Bali”. Especially since the Macan Gading that once existed in Bali was seen last “during the time that these paintings were originally being made”, the paintings used in the animation with tigers upon them become the “witness to the loss”.

This leads to a third point from Ramesh [8] on how “violence embedded in some of these narratives” as seen animated mythical dragon like birds biting the necks of other things, the *dalang* guttural voice representing Macan Gading’s rage and mourning, which he sees as “grotesque kind of imagery” that “has a very specific social function about reverence and safety” also existing in many parts of Asia. This confirms Shohat and Stam’s statement on the *carnivalesque* and *realist magic* aesthetics that have existed in the non-European aesthetics [4]. Here, Leyla pointed out a vital point that “storytelling could be an act of survival” as the film ends in reminding of the “immense environmental loss in Bali” due to ecological issues such as waste, pollution and over development [8]. Here, Leyla pointed out that there are always two sides of a coin in our natural world, a *Rwa Binneda* in Balinese saying, of what is *skala* (seen) and *niskala* (unseen), of what is protected resulting in harmony and what is destroyed resulting in violence. Having the artwork being divided into the phases of the moon cycle, Leyla is trying to “slow things down” and “use film as a way to focus attention on that which may not be immediately visible”[7].

K-Pop Demon Hunters: Rwa Binneda Gone Pop

Second, we will dive into “K-Pop Demon Hunters”, a full length film on Netflix. Connecting the dots with our previous discussion, “K-Pop Demon Hunters” is literally

the *Rwa Binneda Gone Pop*. As we watch two worlds collide within a grotesque setting in a mythic dimension, Maggie Kang, a South Korean born Canadian film director, explained that all she was aiming for was,

> …an animated movie set in Korea that really showcased our culture and our mythology. I thought demons would be visually spectacular in an animated movie and that led to Demon hunters and K-Pop was the last ingredient in the concept. We wanted to immerse the world in K-Pop, but also stay authentically Korean [9].

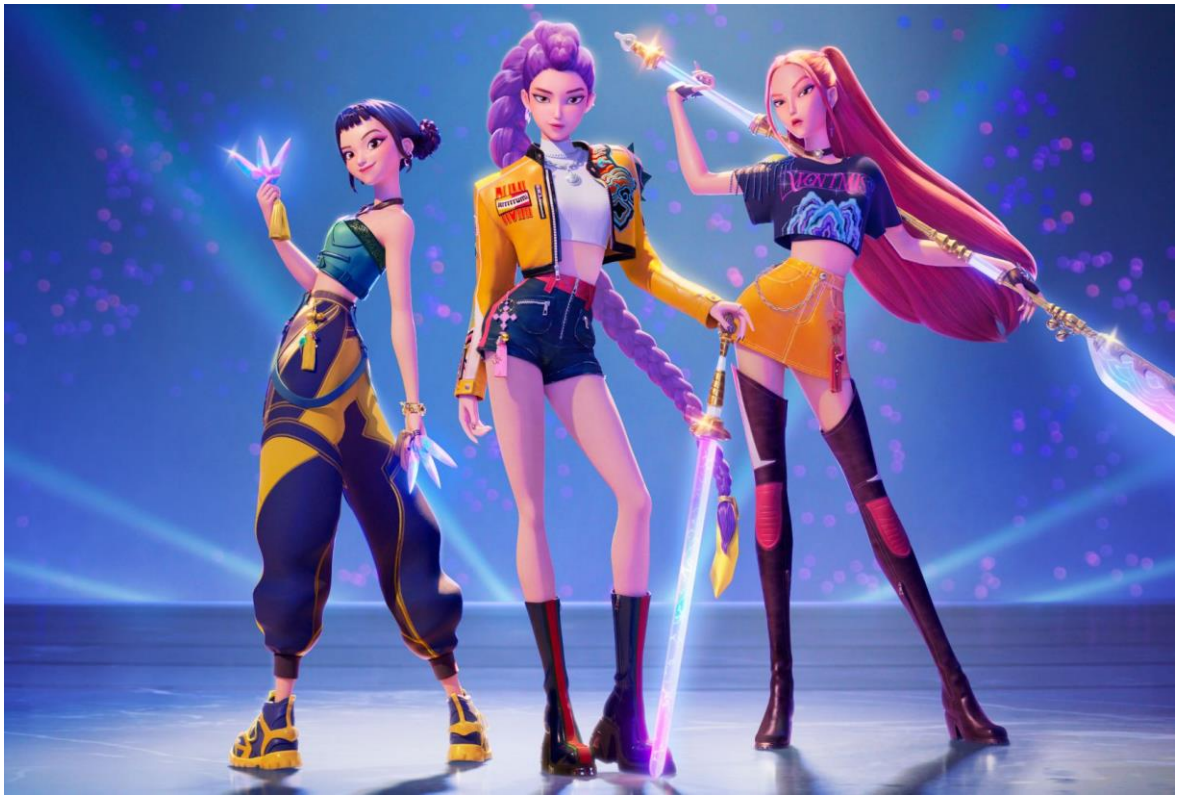

Image Credit: (Netflix) “Kpop Demon Hunters”: Huntr/x shows off their weapons

As written in The Korean Herald, Park Jun-hee [10] stated that the film is filled with “something even more powerful” other than about the K-pop glittery shows. They are “a rich blend of Korean culture, age-old traditions, and shamanistic elements woven into the story and characters”. The story consists of a girlband named Huntrix who are also Demon Hunters who protect the fans from supernatural threats and the Honmoon, a word combination of hon (soul) and moon (door) meaning “a mystical gate or barrier that separates the human world from the demon realm”. This Honmoon is a reflection of a Korean shamanic ritual usually performed by shamans or “mudang” with its purpose “to drive away evil spirits, bring good fortune, resolve misfortune and foster harmony between the human and spirit worlds” which involve music, dance, costumes and chants.

Huntrix’s weapons were also inspired by “traditional Korean weaponry and shamanic instruments” such as character Rumi’s Four Tiger Sword in the Joseon Dynasty era (1392-1910) for each four cardinal directions that is guarded by a mythical tiger; Mira’s Gokdo inspired by the *Cheolyeomchu* from Goguryeo Kingdom (37 BC - 668 AD); and Zoey’s *shinkal* blade with a *norigae* - “a traditional Korean pendant accessory worn by women” which reflect “the grace and spirit of women from the Joseon era” [10].

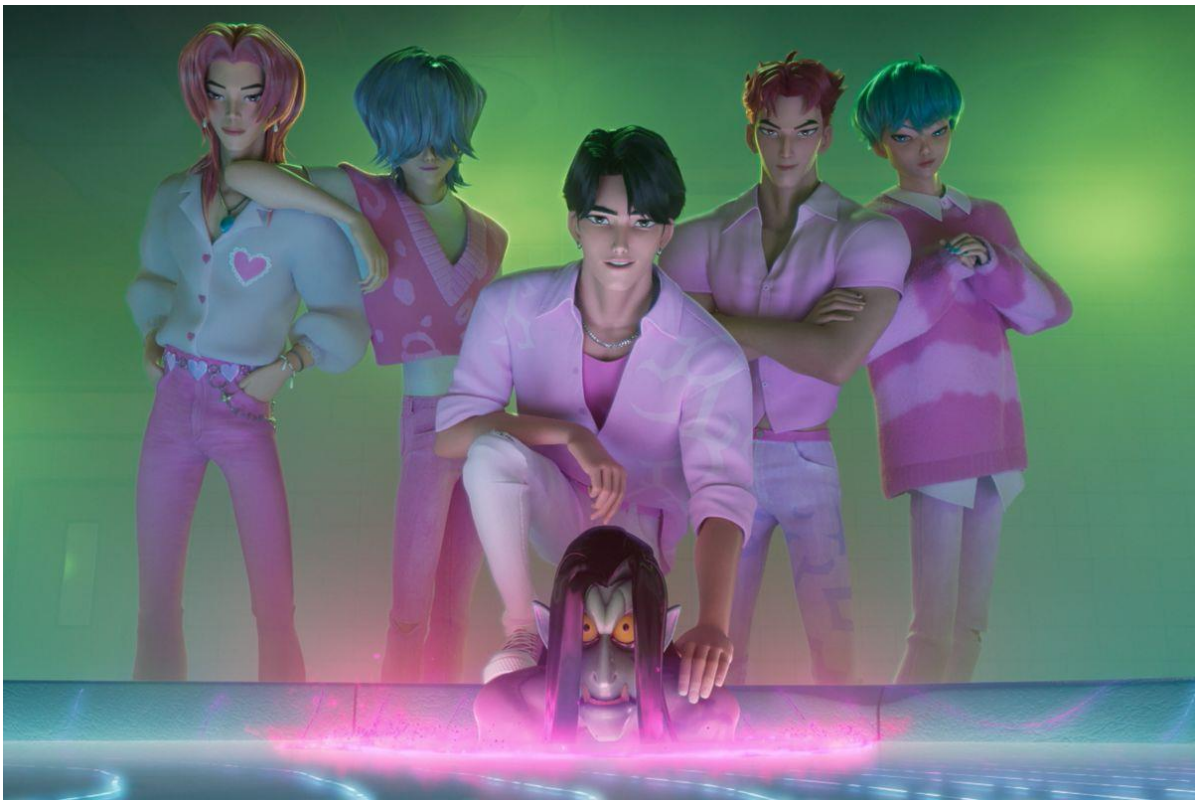

Image Credit: (Netflix) “Kpop Demon Hunters”: The Saja Boys in a Korean spa with a demon

The Huntrix successful protection of the Honmoon causes Gwi-Ma, the conqueror of the Demon realm, have had no souls to eat and have not succeeded in diminishing the Huntrix until one of the *Jeosung-saja*, “a grim reaper-like mythical figure who guides soils to the afterlife”, named Jinu, suggested creating their own demon boyband called the Saja Boys to defeat Huntrix’s popularity by seducing with their voice and looks while stealing the souls for Gwi-Ma and the demon realm to gain power. Hence, Saja which is also translated to lion that symbolises “strength and power”, Saja Boys is actually derived from the group of five Jeosung-saja [10]. Park Han-sol of The Korea Times [11], they are stated to be “under the bureaucratic command of King Yeonma, the ruler of the netherworld” and “their appearance have shifted over the centuries” in which the black *hanbok* (traditional korean attire) and a *gat* became the popular depiction, like the Saja Boys real demonic form. In short, the movie also depicts how fans can be so

obsessed with their idol bands in the K-Pop real world, and so “the twist on Korean folklore helps to understand music fandom” [12].

Before we go further into using the word demon, I would like to offer by calling them daemon instead. Daemon [13] is an archaic spelling of demon and in ancient Greek belief, is a supernatural being of part god part human yet more powerful than human. In general English, demon refers to evil spirits, yet in this matter, like in Bali, daemons are not quite evil spirits. In Bali we know them as Bhuta Kala who lives in the underworld and symbolises “the accumulation of negative human thoughts, words and acts within a time span” [14]. Hence, what’s being told in K-Pop Demon Hunters are actually what is known as daemons or Bhuta Kala in Bali. Furthermore, Kang’s explanation that “Gwi-Ma is the big bad” and that he is “the voice in all our heads” strengthen the view that the demons referred to in this movie are daemons.

Interestingly, accompanying daemon Jinu, is a tiger and a magpie, based on a fable folklore *minhwa* (Korean folk art and genre paintings) motif known as “hojakdo or jakhodo” about the tiger and magpie [11]. Also existing within the Joseon Dynasty, the *minhwa* existed to be no longer a form of “refined conventions of court painting” so it can “embrace raw charm and unrestrained spontaneity” which then with its "mischievous details” could reflect “imaginative desires” and “everyday humour”. “Hojakdo” tells a story as such,

> …the tiger isn’t a fearsome predator, but a bumbling creature. With bulging eyes, a gaping mouth and a lolling tongue, the animal was meant to caricature the “yangban” aristocracy. By contrast, the bird, clever and quick-witted, stood as a symbol of the common people. Traditionally the tiger was seen as a guardian against evil spirits and the magpie as a harbinger of good news. But in *minhwa*, these auspicious figures took on a satirical twist, delivering a playful jab at those in power.

What’s even more comedic, the reference that Jinu’s magpie named Sussy was wearing the *gat* which he made for the tiger named Derpy - “I made it for the tiger, but the bird keeps taking it” - is “an affectionate nod to the long running visual joke”[11]. Again, this resonates with the Tantri stories part of “Pahit Manis, Night Forest”, Tantri being fables as oral stories to be told. It could be seen that *Minhwa* and *Tantri* are both ways of resisting the kingdom’s egocentric traits, creating certain visuals that depict a people’s movement on morality.

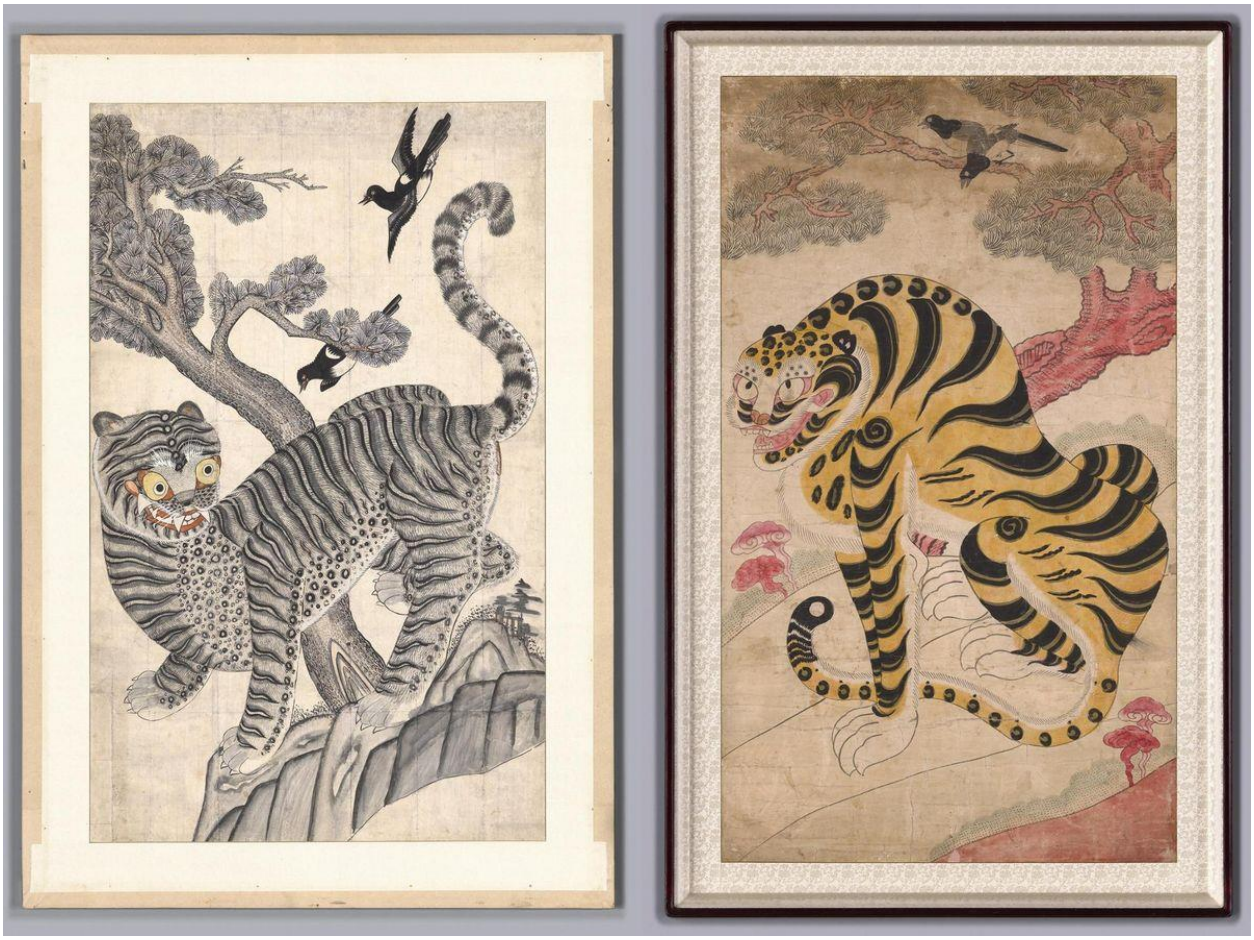

Image Credit: Joseon-era folk paintings of "hojakdo" (tiger and magpie) / Courtesy of National Museum of Korea

Another Joseon Dynasty reference that we can see in this movie is during the Idol Awards scene when Huntrix performed the song “Golden” upon a “Irworobongdo” backdrop, meaning “Painting of the Sun, Moon and Five Peaks”, used as a “folding screen traditionally placed behind the royal throne in the main halls” [11], [15]. The *Irworobongdo* also "symbolised the king’s presence” being “a visual embodiment of royal authority, cosmic order and sovereign dignity”. As this scene comes up, it brought the audience to be reminded of the symbolisms of cosmology, a look back to how “Pahit Manis, Night Forest” used the phases of the moon cycle in staging the story to a contemporary audience.

K-Pop Demon Hunters also aimed to have the story as humane as possible by having the main characters of Huntrix being “girls act like girls and not just pristine superheroes” as they munch on their favourite food and where loose clothes when they are not performing, like what you would see in many K-dramas [9]. Korean-American voice actors of K-Pop Demon Hunters are proud of having this film as an “opportunity to represent Korean-Americans” and that “there is a great ecosystem and Korean talent

all coming together to create something unique". The film makers are very inspired by the K-Pop culture of fans service, being trainees, working hard for the fans. As Kang [12] put it,

> K-Pop as a genre of music, has taught us - that it doesn't matter what language the song is in. It doesn't matter what nationality, what culture the singers are; you are just kind of vibing with the music. You're emotionally connected to something so musically you're just drawn to it, and you don't really have to understand the lyrics in order to feel something. It's really interesting and fun to see the message of the movie do its thing in real life with the release [of its own songs]. In that way, it has just kind of naturally become meaningful for everybody.

As a whole, "K-Pop Demon Hunters" attempted to give the whole package as an animated film: a Korean folklore wrapped in its current K-culture. On its own standing, it has become one of the most successful films to do so, especially having its songs become its own hits having it coming from non-human girl and boy bands. It went beyond its own mythic dimension.

Conclusion

Both "Pahit Manis, Night Forest" and "K-Pop Demon Hunters" as art films have re-introduced the people's stories that were once ancestral stories to the newer generation. Folklores being slipped into the films, represented in slightly different ways, moving away from its original forms of visuals i.e. paintings, have created fresh approaches to telling the story to a wider and younger global audience.

With the effects of colonialism crossing paths with indigenous stories have become triggers of realisation that the most important and vital thing to do is having these ancestral stories retold in the contemporary time. Grotesque approaches of carnivalesque and realist magic, infused by mythic dimensions, resulting in blurting out or bluntly telling the real situation to the world. Daemons as Buta Kala as reminders of times and morality, can become our slowing down reminders on navigating positivity and negativity as a human. They might still be in forms of what's seen as symbols, yet filled with guidance to actions in preserving and conserving our habitats. Storytelling as a way of surviving seems vividly emerging not only in "Pahit Manis, Night Forest" but also through "K-Pop Demon Hunters".

After being exhibited in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, "Pahit Manis, Night Forest" film travelled back to Bali to be shown to the descendants of Batuan painters. Here the descendants felt that they could see these paintings being brought alive and seen as a dynamic archive. Made Griyawan then proposed the film to be shown at the ARMA Fest 2025, which then reached a wider audience at a significant cultural place in Bali. It was also shown to a wider audience at Potato Head and greeted with positive feedback. Leyla would like one day the real paintings come back to be shown in Bali, possibly repatriated to its families too.

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