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Dealing with Indonesia's colonial legacy through the cinematic superhero

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NATIONAL SUPERHEROES OUT OF WORK: DEALING WITH INDONESIA'S COLONIAL LEGACY THROUGH THE CINEMATIC SUPERHERO

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"Iron Man Soon to Be Naturalized", a front-page headline in Wimar Herdanto's *Gundah Gundala* (2013).

In 2019 Joko Anwar's superhero movie *Gundala: Negeri Ini Butuh Patriot* (distributed internationally as *Gundala: Rise of a Hero*) became a national box office hit in Indonesia. It attracted almost 1.7 million visitors in cinemas, proving the appeal of a domestic superhero for the Indonesian nation (*Film Indonesia*, "[Data penonton 2019](#)"). The film is the start of a larger Bumilangit Cinematic Universe in which superheroes from the Indonesian Bumilangit comics are translated to the big screen. It thus shares similarities with its American counterparts in which film studios and comic book publishers work together like the DC Extended Universe and Marvel Cinematic Universe. A more recent American example is the Vin Diesel helmed *Bloodshot* (David SF Wilson, 2020) based on the Valiant Comics, with the goal to start another cinematic universe in which other superheroes will be adapted to cinema. Such a shared cinematic universe is not only highly profitable, but also highly popular.

In the case of the Bumilangit Cinematic Universe, other films are yet to be released, but *Sri Asih* (directed by Upi Avianto) and *Patriot Taruna: Virgo and the Sparklings* (directed by Ody C Harahap) are currently in production with a possible 2021 release. Prominent actors Joe Taslim and Chelsea Islan, amongst others, have already been cast as other key superheroes for future movies. Erick Thohir, current Minister of State-Owned Enterprises and executive producer of the Bumilangit Cinematic Universe, commented on the popularity of foreign superheroes in Indonesia. He said: "Hollywood superhero films have succeeded in dominating the national market, I hope it's time for Indonesian superhero films to be well received in their own country, even in other countries if possible" ([bumilangit.com](#), "[Bumilangit Cinematic Universe](#)"). Thohir's hopes have become reality seeing that *Gundala* received national and international nominations and accolades, but maybe more importantly seeing its success at the domestic box office. ([bumilangit-cinematic-universe](#))

Joko Anwar's *Gundala*, however, was not the first film adaptation of the titular hero. A version was released in 1981 titled *Gundala Putra Petir* ("Gundala: Son of Lightning") directed by Lilik Sudijo. Between the releases of Sudijo's 1981 version and Anwar's 2019 version, an independent adaptation was made on which I want to focus in this essay, namely the short film *Gundah Gundala* by Surabayan filmmaker Wimar Herdanto. *Gundah Gundala* is a 2013 satirical Indonesian superhero movie with a running time of eight minutes, in which the film's title loosely translates as being "depressed or dispirited Gundala". The film depicts a conversation between a stranger and the comic book superhero Gundala, who yields the power of lightning. Gundala has in effect retired and experiences anxiety since his job as a superhero has been taken over by foreign superheroes. The poster of the film depicts Gundala in his retired form: he now wears glasses and is overweight as shown by his protruding belly.



Joko Anwar's *Gundala* (2019) in action.

Gundala was created in 1969 at the age of 23 by the late Harya Suraminata, better known as Hasmi. The superhero has similarities to the well-known Marvel superhero Thor in the sense that they both have control over lightning and thunder. Thor, however, is certainly not the only, nor the first 'thunder yielding character' as Gundala was rather inspired by the Javanese legend Ki Ageng Selo, who is able to catch lightning with his hands. In Indonesia, as elsewhere, superhero movies are extremely popular. These films, however, depict global superheroes and local superheroes tend to be overlooked. Wimar as a filmmaker plays with this development in *Gundah Gundala* and I want to briefly relate that here to issues of postcolonialism and globalisation.

In the film, we see dispirited former superhero Gundala on the back of an ojek arriving at a warung where he orders a hot black coffee. He empties his cup in one gulp. Similarly, he lights a cigarette and finishes it in one hit, attracting the attention of another patron. Gundala and the stranger start a conversation about him in current times being jobless. In a flashback Gundala is seen at a job interview where he is chased away by security as the job interviewer does not believe his confession of being a former superhero. Gundala explains to the stranger that global superheroes have taken over the jobs of local superheroes. Iron Man, for example, has even been become an Indonesian national. The result is that Indonesian superheroes are now forced into regular jobs.

The stranger asks where local superheroes have gone and Gundala explains. The aquatic superhero Aquanus who lives underwater is now a seasonal entrepreneur, seen working as a fish seller. Godam, the Man of Steel, spends his days using his powers to repair bicycles. About the elastic man Pangeran Mlaar, Gundala says "I don't think he is still plastic anymore" as he is shown eating multiple plates of food. As Gundala complains about the fate of local superheroes—being replaced by global superheroes—the stranger receives a call by Batman. He reveals himself to be Ghatotkacha with his signature moustache, who is not from the Bumilangit comics, but rather originates from the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata. As Ghatotkacha speeds away to help Batman as a sidekick (his regular sidekick Robin has not shown up for work), Gundala is left bewildered.

Now, three periods in time are crucial to understand the film from the perspective of postcolonialism and globalisation. The first is the emergence of these superheroes at the end of the sixties. This was a period in Indonesia under the authoritarian rule of Suharto, in which one unified and essentialised national identity was being constructed through state discourses. Much less a unification in order to defy foreign influences such as during Sukarno's rule, but much more a sense of unification against dissenting political views and criticism towards the Suharto government. In this context, local superheroes fit within these discourses as they can be seen as a tool to promote nationalism, locality, and centrality within the confines set out by the government.

Second, in recent years, a form of assertive nationalism has emerged in Indonesia. Edward Aspinall argues that there is a particular emphasis on the nation's dignity, or *martabat bangsa*, within this nationalism (2015: 78-79). In 2015 the then Indonesian Trade Minister, for example, put a ban on the import of foreign second-hand clothes because it was affecting the nation's global image. He said: "Let's maintain our dignity and honour as a nation. Why on earth should we be wearing the used bras and underwear of other nations?" (Aspinall 2015: 79). This development can also

be seen in cultural products such as Indonesian films that underscore Indonesia's dignity through proudness of its unique qualities (Arps 2020: 110-112). This contemporary hankering for Indonesia's dignity has strong ties to historical developments. In this regard, I would argue, Dutch colonial policy cannot be overlooked. Thus, lastly, the colonial period must be taken into account.

From a colonial Dutch perspective that started at the beginning of the twentieth century, the native population of Indonesia needed to be helped. This was informed by a Eurocentric idea of modernity in which Indonesians were lagging behind. This policy became known as the Dutch Ethical Policy or *Ethische Politiek*. This policy existed within a broader international endeavour of western civilizations through which colonial powers justified their interventions in non-western societies (Bloembergen and Raben 2009: 7). In a sense, this policy can best be compared to colonial development aid (Praamstra 2011: 11). In essence, it was driven by the idea that the colonised needed help from the coloniser, whilst also being an instrument to expand colonial influence.



Plain-clothed superheroes in Wimar Herdanto's *Gundah Gundala* (2013).

So, how to deal with such a colonial legacy? My argument here is that in *Gundah Gundala* it is done through the concept of the superhero. Taking the definition of the Cambridge dictionary as a point of departure, a superhero is "a character in a film or story who has special strength and uses it to do good things and help other people" or "someone who has done something very brave to help someone else" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, "Superhero"). Now, the idea of a superhero is that they "do good things and help other people", but what this film proposes is that Indonesians do not need help from outside. They do not need foreign aid as they can take care of themselves.

As the stranger/Ghatotkacha says in the film, superheroes are there to help people. Yet *Gundala* argues that because the mobility of global superheroes, local Indonesian superheroes are forced out of their jobs, or, even have to work as a sidekick. The role of the superhero sidekick, here, can also be read as a critique on Indonesians who downplay their own agency. This is strengthened by the fact that it is not a 'regular' comic superhero who becomes a sidekick in the short film, but rather the Javanese version of the Mahabharata hero Ghatotkacha. I refer in particular to his renown in Javanese wayang in which he has gained popular culture hero status. Since then, Ghatotkacha has also been portrayed in comics and a yet-to-be-released film directed by Hanung Bramantyo (*Satria Dewa: Gatotkaca*). But even more so than the other heroes mentioned earlier, Ghatotkacha's link to the world of wayang and epics emphasises the shock of the character of *Gundala* when Ghatotkacha leaves to work as a sidekick for Batman.

There is thus a satirical, but critical, discourse on foreign help and the role Indonesians have in this, which links to Indonesia's status as an independent country. This is further underscored at the very beginning of the film when Indonesia's independence is emphasised when *Gundala* on the back of the ojek passes a mural that celebrates Indonesia's 68th year of independence from the Dutch. The film's story is thus set around 17th August. The director of the film has stated that: "Even though the years of Indonesian independence are continuously celebrated up until 68 years, actually we are not yet aware that we are not fully independent and are still colonised in other forms such as capitalism, internet, media positioning, propaganda through Hollywood films and so on." (*Kinerja*, 12 March 2015).

As I have illustrated in this essay, the short film *Gundah Gundala* deals with Indonesia's colonial legacy through the cinematic superhero. In the film, the figure of the superhero can be understood in relation to an Indonesian national identity. Both *Gundala* and *Ghatotkacha* show different forms of critique on the situation. Whereas foreign powers have put *Gundala* out of work, *Ghatotkacha* relinquishes his agency as an Indonesian superhero in accepting a supporting role. In doing so, the film defends Indonesia's 'national dignity' and responds to colonial ideas that saw help from colonial powers as an ethical responsibility for the welfare of their colonial subjects.

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A PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and the Media Studies Department at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the position of media within the fields of memory studies, postcolonialism and travel studies with the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia as his main research topics. His PhD-project investigates how cultural memories of the violence during the Indonesian War of Independence are produced, constructed and consumed through contemporary Indonesian popular culture.

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