Original article

BOROBUDUR STORY RELIEF, A SILENT VISUAL NARRATION

Primadi TABRANI[1]

[1]*Institut Teknologi Bandung*

ABSTRACT

Our research team found out that prehistory, primitive, traditional and children drawings havenearly the "same" visual language. It uses a different system of drawing then ours. We call these drawings as the 'Introductory' phase of drawing history. Their visuals have its 'grammar', so like in word language, visual language can tell stories. Both have time dimension needed for telling stories. So drawings from the 'introductory' phase are one picture that tells a story. This is one picture silent sequence that can have some scenes, without grids, without texts. This is in tune with Einstein General Relativity Theory (1916), which state that time and space cannot be separated, it is one entity. For a plane Einstein named it STP (Space – Time – Plane). In tune with it, this writer calls this 'new' system of drawing as the STP system of drawing. It has several modes, as: the *Pradaksina*, most characteristic view, multiple view, multiple time and place, twin, layers, film scene, X ray, make larger, make smaller, no perspective, no frame, no zoom ins/outs, etc. The onlookers can 'read' their pictures, because the artist and the onlookers use the same visual language. It is not a 'dead' still picture like a photo without time dimension, it is a 'living' still picture, which have time dimension.

Keywords: Visual language, silent visual narration, grids, 'living' still picture

1. ABOUT BOROBUDUR

Borobudur, a temple in Central Java (built circa year 800) have 1460 panels of story reliefs, the whole consecutive panels are silent sequences. A panel is one picture that tells a story, it is also a sequence that can have some scenes, without grids, without texts (one picture that tells a story mode). Because without grids, the Western experts think a panel is a 'snapshot' in the Naturalistic-Perspective-Freeze moment system from the west, like a photograph, a 'dead' still picture, without time dimension. Actually it is a 'living' still-picture; it is a stop motion movie. When the Borobudur people in the former days see a Borobudur story relief panel, they saw a sequence that can have some scenes as if they watch a film. Precisely, it is a 'film' sequence that can have some scenes in the 'film' scenes mode. Although the Lalitavistara *sutra* came from India, but the visualization of Borobudur story reliefs are more as an encyclopedia of the living and environment of Java around the year 800 [1]

With this new visual language and its STP system of drawing we now can 'read' Borobudur's silent story reliefs. It is a 'general reading', the specific: names, ranks, different kind of gods, goddess, places, etc. are still missing. Don't worry, about this, later we can consult the *sutra.*

2. LALITAVISTARA

This article is about the most popular story relief of Borobudur temple: the Lalitavistara - the live story of Buddha. It is on the temple wall of the first gallery. This first gallery temple wall has two strings of reliefs, Lalitavistara is the upper string. There are 120 silent panels, and is seen and 'read' in the *pradaksina* way, with the temple wall always on our right side. So the ways to see and read the string of this Lalitavistara panels and of a panel are from right to left (the *Pradaksina* mode). If the characters 'face' and 'go' to the left, it means they are going somewhere. But there are some exception, in all panels which depict the Bodhisattva and then the Buddha (since panel 96), he is nearly always in the front view mode, so when he sits, Buddha's *mudra* can be recognized (in all can be seen, told and read about mode). Bodhisattva and Buddha appears in 98 panels from the total 120 Lalitavistara panels, so he is the most important character in the Lalitavistara story relief (appearance frequent mode).

Since we read the panel from right to left (*pradasksina* mode), and Bodhisattva or Buddha is making a journey to a destination, then if he is depicted in the right part of a panel (identification of time & place mode), it means that the journey is still in the early period. When he is depicted in the center of a panel, he

is midway between start and destination. And if he is depicted in the left part of the panel, than he nearly come to his destination. If there are characters that are facing Bodhisattva/Buddha as a focus, doing homage (point of interest mode), then they are gods, goddess, son of gods, etc.

The 1st panel begins at the East staircase entrance, and the last panel, the 120st, also ends at the East staircase entrance.

The translation of the *sutra* consists of 420 pages. Each page consists of about 22 paragraphs. Each panel usually visualized some paragraphs spread out in some pages. The Dutch expert has given a name to each panel, pointed out which paragraphs spread out in which pages are visualized in a panel, and supplied each panel with a short description of the story in that panel.

3. THE *SUTRA* & THE SILENT VISUAL NARRATION

The chronological order to 'read' the whole string of this story relief panels is from right to left (*Pradaksina* mode), according the chronological order of the pages and the paragraphs. There are flash forwards and flash backs in reading those string of panels.

We already knew that word language has a different way to tell stories than visual language. Both have its specific way of telling stories. This also happens with the Borobudur silent visual narration. In each panel the Dutch expert usually likes if the relief are consistent with the *sutra.* Much comments about this in the Dutch expert classical book [2]. The Dutch expert usually considers the panels as a photographic still picture from the Naturalistic-perspective-freeze moment system of drawing from the West. He usually seeks which paragraph in which page is 'clicked' – depicted in a panel. They did not find it, and they thought about the possibility that the carvers of Borobudur might use a different *sutra* [2]. Of course they did not find it, since the Borobudur carvers integrate all the *sutra* for a specific panel (all paragraph in all pages), so the silent panel become a happening with different times and different places, but without any grids.

Chronologically, to 'read' a panel is also from right to left, according to the order of pages and paragraphs. But this opens a unique way of 'reading' the panel in the dream-time mode: we can begin with any film scene (which paragraph on which page), then with the help of flash backs mode and flash forwards mode, we can follow through reading the other film scenes in the panel. And after all film scenes are being read, than the whole message of the panel will come through.

4. READING PANEL 13: "The Conception"

(Page 54 paragraph 18; page 55 para-graph 2; page 64 paragraph 11)

Panel 13 is chosen because we have the flash forward mode and the flash back mode. Incidents in paragraph 2 page 55 and incidents in paragraph 11 page 64 happens at the same time as the conception, so it is put in this one panel (the description of time mode), although they are a good distance away in the *sutra*. There are many intervening panels: panel number 15 to panel number 21 (pages 55 to pages 59 of the *sutra*) that happens after the conception. So here happens a flash forward mode. When we go to the next panel, it means to the left (*pradaksina* mode) than happens a flash back mode).

At the right side (the *Pradaksina* mode) we see the guards outside the building, with trees. It is outside the building (the place identification mode). This means the event of conception is a special occasion. Then, there are two women attendant on the balcony outside the main chamber. In front of the main chamber, (in X ray mode) again some guards.

They are drawn a bit small. If they are drawn the same size (as the sitting characters to the right and left), their bodies will pass the height of the crossbar, and some happening above the crossbar might be blocked, and cannot be seen (the all must be seen, told and read about mode). So all the guards that is in front of the chamber are in the made smaller mode, to fit in the space under the crossbar (decorative mode).

There are many incidents like this in the numerous Borobudur story reliefs' panels, for example to depict characters sitting in front of a couch.

The women with high rank attributes is lying on her couch in her chamber (X ray mode), accompanied by women attendants waiting the conception.

At the furthest left (the pradaksina mode) are the last three happenings. At the left hand upper corner the Bodhisattva in the form as an elephant are preparing to enter the womb of the women with high rank attributes for the conception. The second is the lotus that rose up very high. Third, below at the left hand corner there are some divine witnesses of the conception.

5. READING PANEL 27: "Maya Betakes To the Lumbini Park"

(Page 80 paragraph 9; and page 81 paragraph 21)

From the relief visuals we can already 'read' that the happening take place in the suburbs with many trees (place identification mode). And the panel looks crowded (space identification mode), some characters are barely seen (but still seen, so it is in the shifted and head to foot mode: all can be seen, told and read about).

The cariage and the horses are in the most characteristic view mode, so it is easy to see, told and read about. The movement of the lower trunks of the women are so clear (the women's sarong are so thin, so the movement of the trunks are clearly visible (X Ray mode). It shows that there are only small space for each person to move, but at the same time the gestures (head to foot mode) shows that all the people are glad and relaxed. Nearly all body of the characters are facing right to left (the Pradaksina mode), so they are going somewhere.

The composition make us feel that the women in the carriage (in the centre mode) must be an important one, more over she wears a halo, with high rank atributs, and is under an umbrella and under other high rank symbols. The man are in front, opening the ways. The first

two are holding banners and symbols that the women in the carriage must be an important person. The women escorts are behind the carriage, except the two man holding an umbrella and a symbol of high rank, right behind the carriage.

6. READING PANIL 28: "The Birth Of The Bodhisattva"

(Page 82: 14; page 83: 3,12,19; page 84:15)

There is ample space in the middle of the panel (in the middle and important mode), on which a decorated tree is the center. Flanking the tree are a women and a child. The women on the right with high rank attribute stands on a stone pedestal (a sign of define). To the left of the tree, a child with highborn attributes walking on pedestals, this time seven lotuses (sign of Bodhisattva). The first film scene are the group of women escorting the define women. The second film scene is the process of giving birth by the define women who stretch her right arm to hold a tree branch; the attendants are helping the process of birth. The define women, drawn with her stomach already flat: the process of birth has happen. The whole second scene is a

birth happening. The third film scene is the Bodhisattva from a baby to become a grown up boy and makes his seven steps. The fourth film scene are the gods and goddess from heaven that pour perfumed water and flowers (the flowers in the most characteristic view mode) to the Bodhisattva, and after that they pay homage to Bodhisattva.

There is another mode that usually appears in a Borobudur story relief. If we scrutinize this panel, we can see that the characters in front of the carriage are 'whispering' one to another, answering one after the other. It also happens with the characters behind the carriage. It is not a still picture, it is a happening. It is in the happening mode.

7. READING PANEL 41: "The Cakya's Request the Bodhisattfa To Marry"

(Page 137: paragraph 5)

Although it is one paragraph in one page, the Dutch expert still get difficulties to read this panel. The story is about the Cakya's assembled together to ask the Bodhisattva to marry, and they feel that their daughters are suitable for the prince. The Dutch expert interpretation is: the Bodhisattva sits in a pavilion

shaped niche, with a *pendopo* adjoining on both sides.

By the Borobudur visual language, all must be seen, so it can be told and read about. Actually there are no *pendopo* adjoining a niche. In Java *pendopo*, a niche is actually inside the one and only *pendapa*. A *pendapa*, a big building without walls, usually stands at a large garden with big trees. The Bodhisattva attendants are actually behind the niche. If so, it can't be seen and told about, so it is opened to the right (comes first – *pradaksina* mode), and then come the Cakya's in front of the Bodhisattva, if so, the Bodhisattva is not seen, and can't be told about. So it is opened to the left, it means they come later (*pradaksina* mode). All is shifted, from head to foot, can be seen and told about, with the Bodhisattva in the middle (the important mode). An interesting visual language (happening mode), happens again in this panel. If someone scrutinized the faces and gestures, then there is a feeling that it is not a still picture: they are not concentrating on what the Bodhisattva says. The Cakya's are 'whispering' and 'answering' one to another, one after another. So are the attendants. It is in the happening mode.

8. READING PANEL 42: "The Bodhisattva Offer the Ring to Gopa"

(Page 142: paragraph 1)

One paragraph from one page, and again the Dutch expert get difficulties to 'read' it, since it is not consistent with the text [2]. The Dutch expert thinks that there are two building, a pavilion with two wings where the Bodhisattva sits on a throne, and a *pendopo*. Actually in Java Palaces there is no throne pavilion that stands alone in a garden.

By the Borobudur visual language, all must be seen, so it can be told and read about. So as in panel 41, the 'pavilion with its niche and throne' is actually inside the *pendopo*. The 'pavilion' is usually on a big pedestal with a throne, a niche and sometimes with a luxurious backdrop. His attendants are behind the throne, if so it will not be seen, so it is 'opened' to the right (comes earlier mode). The solitary maiden sits kneel in front of the throne, if so the Bodhisattva is not seen, so she is put to the left (comes later mode). The maidens in the *pendopo* sits kneel in front of the throne, behind the solitary maiden, if so, the solitary maiden is not seen, so it is 'opened' to the left (comes later mode). All characters is shifted (in shifted and head to foot mode). Thus all can be seen, including their gestures, told and read about.

At first the Dutch expert thinks that this panel is a still picture, so logically the girls in the *pendopo* are the solitary maiden attendants (the text tells that after the other maidens received the magnificent ornament, they hastened away). But then the Dutch expert sees that all the maidens in the *pendopo* are as well dressed as the solitary maiden. So it is more proper to think of them as the other maidens nominated for the Bodhisattva.

So by the Borobudur visual language, the chronological story is like this: The Bodhisattva and his attendants enter the *Pendopo* from the right (*pradaksina* mode). The Bodhisattva then sits on the throne, and his attendants holding jewels and bringing a box, sits behind the Bodhisattva. Then enters the other maidens and sits in front of the Bodhisattva. The maidens then one by one come forward to the Bodhisattva, and after they receive some ornaments, they leave.

Last of all came forward the solitary maiden. The Bodhisattva is giving his ring to the maiden, since all the ornaments are already given away to the other maidens. Again the maidens, the attendants are in a happening, they look, whisper and answer to each other, one after the other, it is in the happening mode. At the right moment all characters are being frozen. All can be seen, told

and read about. So any character that has 'enter' a panel never leaf it! All is there in the frozen happening (the all can be seen, told and read about mode).

9. READING PANEL 49: "The Archery Tournament"

(Page 153: 20; page 154: 10, 22; page 155: 14)

The *sutra* states that after the other contestants take their turn, they leaf the arena. The Bodhisattva took his turn the last of all, so he makes his shot alone. The Dutch expert ask why are there so many other contestant (in the back and front layer) busy drawing a bow, or are drawn as just having shoot their arrow, while some others still have arrows in their hands?

The Dutch expert was also in doubt, which one is the Bodhisattva: The one in the front layer that has just shoot his arrow, which would be in line with the name of this panel. Or the one on the front layer (rather in the middle), standing under the only one umbrella, so it might be the Bodhisattva in the most important mode.

If we turn to the Borobudur visual language grammar: it is read from right to left (*pradaksina* mode), and the back layer is told first, after that, the front layer (layers time identification mode).

So by the Borobudur visual language, the story begins in the right hand side of this panel (*pradaksina* mode). The first film scene: A character with high rank attribute sits on a high pedestal under a canopy (the important mode), with two characters flanking him, each with a fan, cooling him. So he might be the king who staged the archery tournament. The second film scene: he is watching the other contestants in the back layer doing their turn one by one. After that the contestants leave the arena. (The front layer is not yet there). The third film scene: The characters in the front layers (the Bodhisattva and his escort) are dissolved with the back layer. The Bodhisattva is in the middle, busy preparing for his turn. The fourth film scene: the Bodhisattva then steps forward (inserted mode) to the left (*pradaksina* mode), and make his shot. The fifth film scene: because of Bodhisattva's strength, his arrow, is drawn bigger so it can be seen (the make larger and important mode), begins to pierce the seven trees in the far most left side of the panel (*pradaksina* mode). In this panel Bodhisattva is drawn twice (twin mode).The clue: both characters stand on stone pedestals (sign of define).

In this panel visual language, after

inserts, dissolves and mixes mode, at the right moment all characters are being frozen. So again no character that has 'entered' a panel can leaf it, all are still there in the frozen happening. It is the all can be seen, told and read about mode.

10. READING PANEL 84: "Suyata entertain the Bodhisattva"

(Page 267: 13; page 268: 6, 18)

The Dutch expert make a mistake by 'reading' this panel from left to right (the Western way), while it must be read from right to left (*Pradaksina* mode). The *sutra* describes that Suyata, the daughter of the village chief, prepare the meal for the Bodhisattva by herself: from milking the cow to cooking the pap and serving it. The text only mentions one bowl.

But visually the Borobudur carver thought that it is not usual that a daughter (Suyata) of a village chief prepare the meal by herself, so they take the more usual happening: Suyata is helped by her servants. This panel is read from right to left. It begins with a two story building, with the kitchen in the ground floor in X ray mode, so all happenings can be seen, told, and read about. Suyata is helped by 6 women, so

seven women in the kitchen. It begins by cooking the pap in a bowl on a stove. The women are doing different activities, as blowing the fire with a bamboo pipe, and when the pap was ready (a second bowl is drawn), some strewed it with flowers, sprinkled it with perfume, and so on. The Borobudur carvers give us a clue, which one is Suyata: the only women with a bracelet. Finish cooking, all the women (seven) come out to the *pendopo* adored by banners (identification of place mode) to serve the pap to the Bodhisattva. Suyata (with the bracelet) is standing and serving the bowl with the pap to the Bodhisattva. So the bowl is drawn three times in different places (multiple time and place mode). So are the 7 women drawn twice at different time and place (the twin mode).To the furthest left is the Bodhisattva (recognize by sitting on a pedestal and wearing a halo). So the difference between word language of the text and the visual language of this panel is significant.

11. READING PANIL 85: "The Bodhisattva Goes To the Nairanjana"

(Page 269: paragraph 9)

There are at least seven Lalitavistara story reliefs panel with a river in it: panel

no 76, 77, 85, 86, 87, 88 and 115. The Borobudur visual language to draw a river is something like this: there are always ripples, sometimes small waves. The river is drawn in the X ray mode, so the fishes, stones and rocks inside the river are visible. It is not in perspective, but a cut across its width mode, the surface of the river is horizontal, or a cut along its length mode, the river is flowing upward or downward.

Panel 85 above is a sequence in a rural site with trees, animals, and a river. At the right side of the panel it begins with trees, two deer and two expressive squirrels and the river that flows upward. It is in X ray mode, the fishes are seen in the river. The river is in the cut along the length mode, while the Dutch expert thinks it is in perspective, since the trees in the upper part of the panel are 'smaller'. Actually it is in the no perspective mode, the trees are smaller because the space up the river is small, so the trees is made to fit this space, it is in the make smaller and the decorative mode. But the leaves are the same size as the other trees, and the deer below are in the made smaller mode, while the squirrels are in the made larger mode, it is important, and with expressive movement. So it is not in the western perspective way.

The *sutra* text says that the Bodhisattva laid the bowl and his monk dress on the bank and stepped into the river Nairanjana to refresh his limbs. But the drawing shows Bodhisattva standing full dressed (in X ray mode), beside the river, with the bowl in his right hand.

It is again in the Borobudur film scene mode: The Bodhisattva fully dressed with the bowl in his hand came to the river, laid the bowl and his monk dress on the bank, stepped into the river, refresh his limbs, get out the river, dressed, stands beside the river with the bowl in his right hand. In front of the Bodhisattva to the left of the panel, four characters with high rank attributes, and do him homage. In the furthest left are several trees and birds flying in the sky.

12. READING PANIL 86: "The Bodhisattva Takes a Bath"

(Page 269 paragraph 13)

I choose this panel for discussion because it depicts a river and creatures hovering in the sky.

Although it is only one paragraph in one page, again the Dutch expert gets difficulties in reading it.

The place of happening in this panel is a forest with karst hill, trees, river and

animals. The karst hill is drawn in the right side of the panel. The karst hill in the other panels is also drawn this way. The river water level is horizontal, with its surface up to the tip of the lowest Bodhisattva garment (in X ray mode), who stands on a flat lotus (the sign of Bodhisattva), in the water (X ray mode). In the sky expressively hover characters with high rank attributes and high crowns. They bring garlands of flowers (the single flowers are in the top view mode). They must be the gods and goddess. The 'sign' of hovering in the sky are expressive and decorative clouds around their lower part of the body. To the left of Bodhisattva sits kneels some high rank characters, with their hands in the water (X ray mode), do something in the water and cause more ripples in the water. Still to the left corner, there are some animals.

The Dutch expert was asking why the Bodhisattva still decorously wears his clothes on, while the *sutra* states that it was a bathing scene [2]. The Borobudur visual language: it is a bathing film scene mode. It begins with the Bodhisattva still dressed, then undressed and bathed, then dressed again. It is a bathing happening.

12. CONCLUSIONS

The whole 1460 panels of the Borobudur temple are a silent visual narration without text. So do the 120 Lalitavistara

story relief panels. Some of the Lalitavistara consecutive story relief panels have its flash forward and its flashback mode. It is read from right to left, also for a panel. Each panel visualized some paragraph spread out in some pages. Chronologically we can follow the story from right to left according the chronology of the paragraphs and the pages. This fact induces the dream time mode in reading the panel. We can begin with any film scene of a panel, then by flash backs and flash forwards, we follow reading the other film scenes of a panel. And after reading all the film scenes of that panel, we are able to catch the whole messages of that specific panel.

At the right moment, with inserts, dissolves, mixes mode, all characters are frozen, so it is in the all can be seen, told and read about mode. No character that enter a panel, ever leave it, they all are there in a frozen happening. It is as if Borobudur already uses 'several cameras' and uses the 20th century 'electronic digital TV editing'.

So many principles of cinematography are already there with the Borobudur visual language; it does not become a 'moving film', only because the technology is not yet invented.

This STP system of drawing and its traditional visual language is not only able to read pictures (with or without

text), but also to create visual art. This STP system of drawing and its traditional visual language can become an alternative way in creating comic strips, films, TV programs, animation, digital editing, and creating the other visual arts as well.

For examples, Garin Nugroho, an Indonesian cinema maker, intuitively 'use' the Borobudur visual language. So does the painter Dede Eri Supria. This is one of the reasons why both artists 'exist' internationally, since their visual language is 'different', unique, oriental, and does not only use the western visual language.

This new visual language is already in the curriculum of some Faculty of Visual art and Design in Indonesia. It is also being socialized through seminars, whether in Indonesia or abroad. Some articles in journals and some books are already published about it.

We can move forward by 'leaping', since the STP system of drawing and its traditional visual language are 'born' in Indonesia.

The question then is: Who dares? And who are afraid?

REFERENCES

[1] Marzuki Y, Heraty T. Borobudur. Jakarta: Djambatan; 1982.

[2] Krom N.J. Barabudur, Archaeological Description, Part I And Part Ia. Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague; 1927.

[3] Tabrani P. The Study of the Visual Language of Wayang Beber Jaka Kembang Kuning, by a Comparative Study with the Visual Language of Modern Two Dimensional Static Audio Visual Media, In Connection With The Visual Language of Prehistory, Primitive, Children Drawings, and Lalitavistara Reliefs of Borobudur. Doctorate Dissertation. Bandung: Institut Teknologi Bandung; 1991.

[4] Hawking S. A Brief History of Time. New York: Bantam Books; 1996.

[5] McLuhan M. Understanding Media. New York: New American Library; 1964.

[6] Tabrani P. 1994, Children Drawing Visual Language, How much do we know about it? SPAFA-SEAMEO Workshop, Bangkok.

[7] Tabrani P. Traditional visual art concepts, a source to go beyond 2000. ASPACAE 8th International Conference for the Asia Pacific Confederation of Art Education. Melbourne; 1997.

[8] Tabrani P. Searching for an identity: Communication aspects of the visual language of Indonesian comics. Jakarta: Directorate General of Culture, Ministry of Education and Culture; 1998.

[9] Tabrani P.   Messages from Ancient Walls. Bandung: ITB Press; 1998.

[10] Tabrani   P.   Visual   Language*.* Bandung: Kelir Publisher; 2012.

[11] Wospakrik HJ. Einstein's Relativity Theory*.* Bandung: ITB Press; 1985.