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# Mabuk modern and gila barat - Progress, modernity, and imagination Literary images of city life in colonial Indonesia

I would not miss this opportunity to thank Bob Hering wholeheartedly for his interest in my work and his kind support over the last years — without him I might never have experienced life in Australia. This contribution is a preliminary draft of a chapter which will be included in the book hopefully resulting from my current research.<sup>1</sup>

Talking about 'city life', 'urbanity', or big cities' means talking about ideas, constructions, and 'structures of feeling' (Williams). Numerous definitions, mainly based on figures and statistics, define what is to be called a city or a town or a village. But

the City, from the point of view of this paper, is something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences - streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones etc.; something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices - courts, hospitals, schools, police, and civil fonctionaries of various sorts. The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition.' (Park 1952:13.)

'City' as a 'state of mind' is as much an ambiguous phenomenon as modernity is. 'City', on the one hand, causes the decomposition of primary life patterns and social structures. As a consequence, 'city' is often described as a threatening labyrinth or life in a jungle. Bureaucracy, anonymity, and alienation are just a few keywords here. The various social roles imposed on people in the city easily lead to stress. On the other hand, 'city' might just as well be conceived of as an extension of life experience. Its structure offers and intensifies new modes of perception and communication. In that case, the anonymity of city life, indeed, provides relief from strain.<sup>2</sup> Only the city allows the casual *Buick des Flaneurs*, as Benjamin calls it, seeing

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Joshua Barker, PhD student at Cornell University, for the very stimulating discussion we had on the topic of technology and modernization in Indonesia. I hope it will eventually result in the planned joint publication.

<sup>2</sup> For general studies on the topic 'city in literature' see Klotz 1969, Pfeiffer 1988 and Hauser 1990.

with the stroller's eye. The stroller walks the city, discovering and viewing, but always keeping his distance. In fact,

'Strolling is a manner of reading the street whereby people's faces, displayed wares, shop windows, coffee-house terraces, trains, cars, trees all become alphabet letters of equal value that together form words, sentences and pages of a constantly changing book. In order to stroll correctly one cannot have all that specific a purpose.' (Hessel 1984:145.)

'City' can be read by its signs and it can just as well be narrated. The *idea des Flaneurs* has materialized in numerous works of western literature and seems an appropriate expression of the general euphoria of city mythology. The potentials that lie in city structures are closely linked to the individual conception of 'modernity' which sets the frame for the attitudes displayed towards the city:

'To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world — and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are' (Berman 1988:15).

The enthusiasm and blind awe that European societies had been demonstrating since the early nineteenth century when idealizing modernity, technology and rationality started to turn into scepticism and fear around the turn of this century. The first decades of the twentieth century were marked by deep concern, the 'achievements of modernity' were apparently getting out of control. Most of all, the unceasing progress of technology, but also the rapid growth of cities were being watched anxiously. The growing criticism towards 'civilization' also manifested itself in works of fine arts, literature, journalism, photography, and film.

The Netherland East Indies underwent, particularly in terms of urbanization, a comparable process of modernization, only in a much shorter period of time and under the conditions of colonialism. Cities grew and were formed according to colonial needs.<sup>3</sup> Although cities like Bandung, Batavia or Surabaya had incorporated essential elements of the traditional structure of the Indonesian *kota* (Gill 1995:82-90), they all exhibited an European countenance: train station, hotels, bank and post offices, schools, theatres and cinemas, shopping areas, a network of main and side streets, and lively traffic (usually trams, horsecarts, Europeans in their motorcars and Indonesians on bikes). Due to their different cultural background, their different standing in colonial society and accordingly their unequal opportunities, it can be assumed that the native Malay, the

<sup>3</sup> In 1920, there were 37 locations with more than 20,000 inhabitants and only 5 with more than 100,000, namely Jakarta, Surabaya, Semarang, Surakarta, and Yogyakarta. Ten years later, already 53 sites numbered more than 20,000 inhabitants, and Palembang and Bandung had joined the list of cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Iih Abdurachim 1978:4-5). For a description of the urban culture of Surabaya in the 1920s see Labrousse (1986).

Chinese, the Eurasians, and the Europeans perceived and judged the city differently.

When reading through almost a hundred of (non-Balai Pustaka) Indonesian novels produced in the Netherlands East Indies in the early twentieth century, I could not help noticing that both 'city life' and 'modernity' stood out as major topics. The plots are usually set in Medan, the 'Dollarland', Bandung, the 'Paris of Java', or Batavia, the 'Queen City of the East'. Such epithets were popular among the Indonesian and European population alike and already indicate that 'city-ness', indeed, stood for something more than a mere accumulation of buildings and people. I grew curious and started to look for text passages which might allude to conflicting attitudes towards 'city' as described above. The results I would like to discuss in the following.

Generally, the Indonesian understanding of modernity did not deviate too much from the European concept at that time. Drastic changes in lifestyle and social structures were subsumed under the category 'modernity' just as technical progress, mobility, traffic, architecture, design, or streetlights were. Only that it was not technology and its products that aroused the scepticism of the Indonesians, but rather the shifts in social structures and roles.

'The western manners, I have to admit, include a number of aspects that are actually positive and can be of use for Indonesians. But the western manners are not entirely suitable for the Eastern soul. The majority of our people, in fact, already absorb western manners without any prior selection until the absorbed eventually brings about results that do not further progress but rather evokes effects that are tantamount to self-poisoning.' (Achsien 1940:i.)<sup>4</sup>

The term *kebarat-baratan* (*barat* = western) is used regularly and disparagingly many times and actually advanced to become one of the most dominating elements of plot in the indigenous novels of the 1920s and 1930s. *Kebarat-baratan* is more than a term for westernization or an overdone imitation of western lifestyle. Rather, it stands for the fear of betraying and losing one's traditional values and family bonds. It bears the uncertain feeling of going astray and losing track of one's own roots. The term *kebarat-baratan* (and its counter-part *ketimoeran*, *timoer* = eastern) exposes the epitome of an identity in turmoil.

'Dasril now already knows his ways around in Betawi! Continuously, step by step, Dasril drifts further and further, washed away by the current of *kebarat-*

<sup>4</sup> 'Kesopanan-barat, saia moesti akoehi, bahoea didalemnja banjak sekali "hal-hal" jang sebetoenja sanget berfaedah dan bergoena sekali, oentoek tanah aer dan bangsa Indonesia, akan tetapi tida semoea itoe ada tjotjok dengan batin Timoer. Djoestroe bangsa kita sekarang ini, sebagian besar telah maen telan kesopanan Barat itoe, dengan zonder disaring terlebih doeloe, hingga apa jang marika "telan" itoe membawa akibat, boekan oentoek kemadjoean, aken tetapi, saolah-olah telah ratjoeni diri sendiri setjara heibat sekali.' This and all following translations from the Indonesian novels are by the author.

*baratan*, the longer the less visible he becomes when watched from the coast of *ketimoeran*. Dasril was, in fact, intoxicated by modernity.' (Dali 1940:38)<sup>5</sup>

Dasril, the hero of Mr. *Das Advocaat* by Dali leaves his home village to continue his education in Medan and Batavia. His mother's and sister's sacrifices enable him to finally achieve the title *Meester in de rechten*. He meets a Dutch girl, falls in love, and marries her against his mother's will.<sup>6</sup> In his arrogance and selfishness, Dasril turns his back on his family, and when his sister comes to ask for help, he turns her request down and sends her away rudely. The cards turn when he becomes aware that his wife is betraying him with a Dutch friend. On top of it all, his wife's negligence causes (medically dubious) their young child's death. Dasril begins to question the correctness of his decisions. His wife leaves him, but not without telling him to return to his family, what he regretfully does in the end. He comes home in time to see his mother pass away, forgiving him all his deeds. Turning nationalist, Dasril eventually becomes a 'real' Indonesian.

It is hardly astounding that the idea of *kebarat-baratan* is insolubly linked with the idea of city life. The male protagonist in most cases keenly adapts or imitates western manners and habits as he gets to know them while living in the city.

'In fact, Dasril is a modern person. In all fields [of social life] he is already advanced: having a picnic, going to the movies, on the tennis court he does not fall behind and even on the dance floor his name was not unknown anymore.' (Dali 1940:39)<sup>7</sup>

Although the author unmistakably condemns this tendency towards *kebarat-baratan*, there still is a subtle undertone of acknowledgement: it is, however denounced, well an achievement - at least for Indonesian men - to get that far in colonial Indonesia. And, after all, was it not his wife and her lifestyle that led him astray? It is noteworthy here, however, to point out that the literary discourse upon cultural identity as a whole seems to be confined to the form of a 'surrogate discourse' upon mixed marriages (primarily between Dutch women and Indonesian men).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 'Dasril sekarang soedah tjerdik di Betawi! [...] Perlahan-lahan Dasril makin lama makin djaoeh hanjoet dibawa oleh aroes air kebarat-baratan itoe, kian lama kian sajoep djoega nampaknja bila dipandang dari pantai ketimoeran. Dasril sebenarnja telah djadi "maboek modern".'

<sup>6</sup> Strikingly enough, it is the Indonesian families involved that object to the mixed marriage. No rejecting reaction from the Dutch side is ever mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> 'Soenggoeh, Dasril orang modern. Didalam segala lapangan is telah memadjoekan dirinja, picnic, dibioscoop, dilapangan tennis is ta' ketinggalan, bahkan dimedan dansapoen nama Dasril boekan asing lagi.'

<sup>8</sup> Another famous example in this context is Abdul Muis' novel *Salah asuhan*. Less famous but as good an example is the novel *Valentine Chan atawa rahasa Semarang* by Liem Hian Bing. The book begins with the motto:

'Kawin itoelah menoesia koedoe beboeat,  
[To marry that is something people have to do]

It is obvious from the examined texts that the Indonesian society — and certainly above all the male segment of it — worried about the evil impact that westernization or modernity would have on indigenous women. Novels such as *Gadis modern...?* (Chang Mung Tze 1939) illustrate the assumed influence that modern thinking was feared to exert on young Indonesian women. Entire plots have been created to depict at length how Indonesian women lose their natural feeling for appropriate behaviour when under western influence. 'Modern' Indonesian women behave ruthlessly and shamelessly with no respect for traditional values. It is the city that facilitates a drastic decline in women's respectability and that endangers their purity and honourableness.

Men or women, punishment of some kind is predicted for all who aspire after a career and life in western style. In contrast to male protagonists, however, women are not so easily forgiven. They are, in fact, most often sentenced to literary death:

'Faridah lived in that house all by herself. She had a job that supported her sufficiently. [...] It was her who did not wish to have a close relationship with her family because, in her opinion, all family-related matters only burdened the mind. [...] She felt more at ease on her own, more secure and free. A sense of freedom had long grown inside of her, free of her parents' supervision. She could, as she put it, take care of herself and just as well watch her honour as a woman. Her social contacts were various, 'social contacts' in the western sense of the term, that is. This she had not been taught at school but mostly stemmed from the books that she was reading everyday and which reflected the ideas of western manners.' (Si Oema 1940:12-3)<sup>9</sup>

While Faridah is painfully dying from the poison her murderer forced her to drink, she, of course, thoroughly regrets her decision to live on her own in the city. Faridah's only fault was to deny her roots and family ties, the '*masjarakat berkeloearga-keloearga*' and to willingly adopt an western

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tapi tjarilah jang sedikit sembarat,  
[but look for someone suitable]  
djangan bangga, kaloe ia ada gila barat,  
[not arrogant, her/him getting crazy for western culture]  
achirnja bisa bikin orang djadi sesambat'  
[may eventually make everyone moan and grumble]

It needs further research to corroborate the hypothesis that the topic 'mixed marriages' as part of Indonesian novels indeed served as a miniature discourse replacing the major discourse regarding the conflicts between colonizers and colonized.

<sup>9</sup> 'Faridah tinggal di rumah itoe seorang diri sahadjja. Ia bekerdja mempoenjai pendapatan mentjoekoepi djoega. [...] Ia sendiripoen tidak poela hendak mendekati ahli familienja, sebab, menoeroet pendapatannja, sekalian soal-soal jang bersangkoet paoet dengan soal familie itoe mendjadi beban bagi fikiran. [...] Ia merasa lebih soeka menjendiri, lebih aman dan bebas. Didalam dirinja soedah terboehoel rasa kemerdekaan, merdeka dari penilikan orang-orang toea, sebab menoeroet katanja, ia sendiripoen sanggoep mendjaga dirinja, sanggoep mendjaga kehormatan dirinja. Pergaoelannja sangat loeas, pergaoelan jang diseboetkan orang setjara Barat. Hal ini didapatnja boekan dari pendidikan jang soedah diketjapnja disekolah sahadjja, akan tetapi banjak poela dari boekoe-boekoe jang dibatjanja tiap-tiap hari, jang menggambarkan akan bajangan *adat* istiadat negeri Barat.'

individualistic attitude, the '*masjarakat diri sendiri di negeri Barat*'<sup>10</sup>

Besides the changing image and role of Indonesian women, another 'modern' phenomenon caused concern: crime. Rapidly expanding urbanization, the ever increasing importance of monetary relationships, fast growing poverty hand in hand with social insecurity produced the anti-social structure 'crime'. Its literary reflection eventually introduced a new genre into the Indonesian literature: the detective novel. Streetgangs — *buaja pasar* — appeared in numerous stories and even gave titles to them such as *Djoelist*, *Boeaja Betawi* (Chairat 1940) or *Boeaja Deli Diserkap Matjan Singapoera* (Damhoeri 1938). Most of the Indonesian crime novels evoke the impression that city people are prone to fall victim, either to be mugged, robbed or murdered — or to be enslaved by the secret ruler of the modern world: money (which, on top of it all, often turned out to be fake, as related for instance in the novel *Rahasia Oeang Palsoe*).

It thus comes as no surprise that most of the novels imply a dichotomy between *kota* and *desa*; the village is idyllic, peaceful and safe, the city is hostile and dangerous:

'On the express train that departs from Betawi heading for Bogor, second class, there were Dasril and Elita, sitting side by side. [...] How incredibly peaceful and quiet was the life of the farmers out there, their life under the sapphireblue sky that was decorated by cumulus clouds... Village, village, the secure life in a small village!' (Dali 1940:41.)<sup>12</sup>

Whereas the city in these times is not very safe' (Tio Ie Soei 1922:4) and 'the city-attitude only pays attention to itself, it is completely self-absorbed' (Sou'yb 1939:30).<sup>13</sup>

As the examples discussed so far substantiate, it is not technology that makes the city a dubious place to live. On the contrary, technological progress as witnessed by the Indonesians, primarily with regard to means of communication, transport, or housing, aroused great excitement. The texts let no scepticism or criticism shine through, when telephones ring and gramophones play in indigenous private homes, when cars speed by (driven by Indonesian heroes) endangering innocent pedestrians, and when

<sup>10</sup> Si Oema 1940:53. This article allows no further discussion with regard to gender or distinctly male text strategies. Some more detailed study, however, is desirable in this field.

My current research project primarily deals with the genre of the crime novel in colonial Indonesia. First results can be found in my article 'Crime fiction and genres in colonial Indonesia' (Jedamski 1995). For that reason, I keep the argumentation here on such general level, although much more, particularly at this point, could be said about crime, the city and the literary reflection of their relationship.

<sup>12</sup> 'Dalam kereta api express kelas doea jang berangkat dari Betawi ke Bogor menoeumpang poela Dasril dan Elita, doedoek berdekatan. [...] Wahai alangkah damai dan soenjinja perghidoepan paman-paman tani itoe, hidoep merdeka dibawah langit biroe nilakandi jang berhiaskan awan gemawan... Desa, desa! Hidoep aman didesa!'

<sup>13</sup> '[...] di ini masa ada sanget tiada aman' and 'sifat kekotaan hanja hendak menghiraukan dan mementingkan diri sendiri sadadja'.

planes take the heroes to places in a few hours where neither author nor reader would ever go.

It might not appear astonishing as such that Indonesian writers picked those elements to add some extra spice to their stories. As Indonesians hardly ever had a chance to actively take part in that rather materialistic side of modernization, it is intriguing to take a closer look at their imaginative way of dealing with it. Indonesians usually did not own cars, they could watch them in everyday city traffic or when one passed by in the countryside. As chauffeurs, some Indonesians would steer a car, other personnel would only clean it, help to get it started or pull it up the hill. Taxis were far too expensive for the indigenous population, people would usually walk or ride a bike. It is also safe to state that, with a very few exceptions, no Indonesian household had a private telephone at its disposal, actually, not all European households did. Telephones were installed in offices or public buildings. Thus, the use of a telephone was no daily routine (and still is not). In 1913, a handbook with the title *Handleiding voor het Gebruik en het Onderhoud van Telephoontoestellen* was brought out by the Landsdrukkerij in order to explain correct usage and maintenance of a telephone. Special courses for indigenous officials and employees were offered to familiarize them with the use of a telephone.

The narrative form of the dialogue (with the pretension of being authentic) had just been introduced to the Indonesian literature. The textual presentation of a telephone conversation, however, demanded new writing and reading skills to an even greater extent. Depending on the positioning of the narrator, the complete conversation may be given in the text. Daring writers, however, would realistically fragmentize the conversation by blanking out one of the dialogue partners. It takes, at the very least, some experience with telephone communication to fill in the blanks (which is rather easy in the given example below), if not a whole set of new patterns of perception:

'After the boy had left, the telephone rang. Aida answered it.

- "Hallo!"

- "Oh, I am Mrs Soebrata, toean Resident!"

- "He is in, by chance my husband is at home. Please, wait a second, I call him." While covering the receiver, Aida called her husband.' (Ketjindoan 1941b:9.)<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'Sesoedah djongos itoe pergi maka berboenji telefoon, disamboet oleh Aida.

- "Hallo!"

- "O, saja njonja Soebrata, toean Resident!"

- "Ada, soeami saja kebetoelan ada diroemah. Toenggoe sebentar saja panggulkan!" Sambil menoetoe moeloet telefoon Aida memanggil soeaminja.'

Consciously or not, by choosing this narrative device the author illustrates the fragmentation of modern life.

It appears to me that, while demoted to the role of mere accessories in modern colonial life, the Indonesians switched roles in their literarily expressed imagination. Strikingly, hardly any Dutch character ever enters the imagined world; the Indonesian protagonists take the place of their colonizers: they rent or own cars, drive like hell, have their private telephones, send telegrams and book flights as if it were the most natural thing to do:

The telegram said that Si Bongkok had been seen in Betawi. [...] Thus, Raden Pandji Soebroto left the police station, went straight to seek further information and only at half past three he reached Andir. From far he could already see his friend waiting for him with a plane ready, a fancy sport model. Shortly afterwards they were gliding through the air headed for Betawi.

When they reached Tjililitan he thanked his friend for taking him. Then he got into the car that he had already ordered prior to his departure and left in direction of the address that his assistant had mentioned in his telegram.' (Ketjindoean 1941a:47-8.)<sup>15</sup>

Western authors of popular literature of that time tended to indulge in some sort of car exoticism. They provided their heroes with the most expensive, prominent, extraordinary of all cars and even invented unique phantasy models. The Indonesian authors did not join in in such motorcar cult. They hardly ever mention size or colour, let alone the model of the car, but it had to be available at any time and so fast that one could escape from any pursuer, fly away from any restriction in real life:

'When they had passed Bogor, Moerdiman looked back. Hariati turned around too and looked. Far behind them there was the light of another car. Moerdiman seemed very pleased, then he hit the accelerator until their car would fly. "Someone is following us!" he said. "I'm curious, according to the import firm this car of mine goes faster than any other car", he said. "Don't be scared! In a moment we will be out of sight of the car behind us." Hariati did not reply. He was frightened because the car was speeding as if it was about to take off, it was as if Moerdiman competed with the angel of death.' (Ketjindoean 1941d:53.)<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> "Telegram itoe mentjeritakan, bahwa si Bongkok ada kelihatan di Betawi. [...] Maka Raden Pandji Soebrotopoen meninggalkan kantor politie, ia teroes pergi mentjari keterangan lebih landjoet dan poekoel setengah empat baroe ia ke Andir, dimana dari djaoeh soedah kelihatan olehnja sahabatnja sedia dengan masin oedara sport-model jang bagoes potongannja. Tidak lama kemoedian merekapoen melajang dioedara menoeedjoe Betawi. Sesampai di Tjililitan ia minta terima kasih kepada sahabatnja jang membawanja itoe, laloe dengan auto jang telah dibestel lebih dahoeloe ia menoeedjoe keadres jang diseboetkan pembantoenja didalam telegram jang diterima.'

<sup>o</sup> 'Liwat Bogor Moerdiman memandang kebelakang. Hariati toeroet poela menengok. Djaoeh dibelakang kelihatan api auto lain. Moerdiman kelihatan senang roepanja, laloe diberinja gas lebih banjak, sehingga auto mereka terbang. "Ada orang mendedjar kita!" katanja. "Saja maoe tjoba, menoeeroet importeur auto saja ini tidak dapat terlawan kentjangnja oleh auto



Most of the texts, like the one quoted above, suggest that the authors' imagination received some additional inspiration from the medium film. There is proof that many writers enjoyed the latest western and eastern film productions in their local cinemas, one of the most popular elements of urban life's infrastructure. Most novels explicitly include cinemas in their settings. Cinematic narrative devices (like close-up and cuts) were adopted. The new medium even entered the author's language, for example by way of metaphors that reveal novel manners of perception:

'Ratna could still clearly see the film of her fate before her eyes, moving from one scene to the next' (Dali 1940:6).

or:

'No doubt, that was Elita dancing with Jan Romein whom he saw from his car. [...1 Mr. Das could not bear watching that film showing before his very eyes.' (Dali 1940:66.)<sup>17</sup>

The literary acquisition of technology might be satisfactorily explained as naive 'utopian thinking', but it still seems worthwhile contemplating the cultural acceptance that springs from such literary reflections. The novels in question found an impressively large readership. It can be assumed that the texts helped to create a generally accepting attitude towards technical items that were not yet part of people's everyday life (and still are not). Modernity in the sense of technology, indeed, had gained a positive connotation, but, at the same time, it produced an exaggerated anxiety to present oneself as being one hundred percent 'up to date'. Doubts, hesitation, or uncertainties are ridiculed:

'"Go start our car, Bang Roeslan, so we can go", said Djahoemarkar, and after that they all got in and went off in the direction of the airfield in Kampung Djati Oeloe. On arrival at the airfield, they found people spread all over the field and even outside the fence.

"You all just stay right here while I go buy the tickets", said Djahoemarkar, pushing into the crowd. Sweat broke out on Djahoemarkar as he fought his way to the ticket-seller's box. Once tickets were purchased, he went and got the rest of them and went into the fenced-in field.

"Now don't be awestruck at all this — let's not have people laugh at us. There's the airplane — in a moment it will fly up to the clouds."

"Yes... but what is going to make it fly up, with the plane being so big?" said Sitti Djaerah.

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lain", kata Moerdiman. "Djangan takoet! Sebentar lagi kita akan hilang dari pemandangan auto itoe". Hariati tidak menjahoet. Ketjoet hatinja, karena auto itoe seperti terbang, seakan-akan Moerdiman berlomba dengan malaikat maet.'

<sup>17</sup> 'Masih djelas terbajang-bajang oleh Ratna bagaimana film nasibnja itoe berpoetar dihadapan matanja dari satoe pemandangan kelain pemandangan' or:

'Itoe, djelas benar tampak dari autonja ini, Elita sedang asjik berdansa dengan Jan Romein. [...] Mr. Das ta' dapat melihatkan film itoe berpoetar didepan matanja.'

"Don't worry, he'll make the plane fly — you all just watch and see what happens", said Djahoemarkar.' (Tolbok Haloen, pp. 420, according to Susan Rodgers Siregar 1981:153.)

Several studies have been conducted focusing on the question how the city is presented in western literary texts. The question has not been raised yet with regard to Indonesian literature, although the city has not been less important a topic for Indonesians. How did Indonesian writers present, that is 'narrate' the city?<sup>18</sup> How did they conquer the space of the city and tame it into the space of their texts? In contrast to the western 'metro-politan' novels it can be noted that the Indonesian novels do not create a city mythology by most exhaustively indulging into the depiction of any obvious or hidden detail of city life. Rather, most texts restrain themselves to a standard formulation of some kind:

'The paths and streets in that beautiful city were crowded with all kinds of vehicles, crossing back and forth incessantly' (Djarens 1939:39).<sup>19</sup>

An onomatopoeic description such as the following is rather rare:

'Along the street. Rrrrrt... Rrrrrt.... The noise of cars on the asphalt. People floating up and down the street, they walked in throngs, women and men, young and old, in groups one after the other, continuously, never ever ceasing, headed for the Fancy Fair in the building of the Chinese Lie Lok Poo Club, in Pandopostreet near by the Dutch East Indies Trade Bank. All vehicles were speeding like flashes, there was the thundering sound of the metal horseshoes and the carwheels on the asphalt that added to the bustling of the by-passers.' (Ibrahim 1941:17.)<sup>20</sup>

At first sight, 'city' seems to be condensed to being *riboet* and *rame-rame*, bustling and crowdedness, a backdrop that does not have any significance in its own right. The authors were apparently less interested in the social and cultural phenomenon 'city' as such, but focused their attention on the city's facilities and labels. The narration of 'city' is determined by the reading of its signs: names of districts or places receive full mention, names of buildings (banks, hotels, cinemas) are never omitted, streetnames are recorded accurately; all without any closer characterization of the streets or their inhabitants. It is the same manner in which the reader gets informed of a car license plate number without getting to know what the car looks like. Time and space are captured in time schedules, house or

<sup>18</sup> See Klotz (1969:13) for the term '*die erzählte Stadt*', the narrated city.

<sup>19</sup> 'Lorong-lorong dan djalan dikota jang indah itoe penoeh oleh pelbagai kendaran, bersilang sioertiada poetoensja'.

<sup>20</sup> 'Disepandjang straat. Rrrrrt... Rrrrrt.... Boenji bola auto diatas djalan. Manoesia sidik-midik, berdjalan berdoejoen doejoen, laki-laki perempoean, toea moeda beriring-iringanan samboeng-bersamboeng ta' berhenti-hentinja menoedjoeh ke Fancy Fair di gedoeng Sociteit Tionghoa Kie Lok Poo, di Pandopoststraat dekat kantor Nederlands Indische Handelsbank. Semoea kendaran dilarikan dengan setjepat-tjepatnja sebagai kilat, gemoeroeh tapak kaki koeda dan bola auto diatas asphalt, menambahkan riboetnja orang-orang laloe-lintas.'

telephone numbers, street signs, and number plates. No 'flaneurs', no strollers give their views of the city.

Only two of all the novels might be reckoned as exceptions. In both cases, the protagonist does not stroll through the city on foot but goes by car instead. He moves, however, without destination, and that makes him a 'flaneur' of some sort:

One evening I went in a taxi up and down the streets, circling the spread-out and busy parts of Singapore without destination, just to clear my mind. I told the driver that he might take me wherever he wanted to, whatever places he thought suitable.' (Oesmany 1940:53.)<sup>21</sup>

By driving around in a taxi on his own, entirely absorbed in his own thoughts, the protagonist is actually fleeing the city, he withdraws, individualizes himself. Mr. Das does the same after his wife has left him, except that he turns the city view into a mirror reflecting his own loss and desires:

Mr. Das left his home that had already turned into hell, took the car and drove around in the city to distract himself by going from one alley to the next, from one street to another. Once in a while he would turn his head and look at the peaceful houses. In the light of the porch lamp he would see the family head sit and read the newspaper, at his side his wife absorbed in her sewing dresses for their children, and the children would be playing around.' (Dali 1940:77)<sup>22</sup>

In neither of these examples does the protagonist seek distraction by plunging himself into city life. On the contrary, he withdraws, physically as well as mentally, while moving in a 'protective shell', pondering over his own destiny.

In the novels, the city is not experienced on foot, never discovered and described through the stroller's eye. Everyone is constantly headed, except for the spies, the *mata-mata*, who are — most conspicuously — posted all over the city, watching:

'In the streets the number of spies did not observe less closely, with sharp eyes, their shining look focused on every single movement of the bodies passing by, people walking by just as well as passengers in *bendi* and taxis that crisscrossed the streets.

<sup>21</sup> 'Pada soeatoe malam, oentoek penjegar-njegarkan pikiran, koe moendar-mandir dengan seboeah taksi, mengaroengi kota Singapoera jang loeas dan ramai itoe, dengan tiada tentoe toedjoean jang pasti. Kepada soepir taksi itoe koekatakan, ia boleh membawakoe kemana ia soeka sadsja, ketempat mana jang dirasanja balk.'

<sup>22</sup> 'Dengan autonja Mr. Das meninggalkan roemah tangganja jang soedah sebagai neraka itoe, teroes berpoetar-poetar diseloeroeh kota akan merintang rintang hatinja dari lorong kelorong, dari satoe straat kelain straat. Sekali sekali ia menoleh keroemah-roemah orang jang damai. Dibawah lampoe-lampoe diberanda moeka, doedoek toean roemah sambil membatja soerat kabar, disampingnja isterinja sedang asjik mendjahit badjoe2 anaknja dan anak-anaknja bermain-main berkeliling.'

There, [...] in the Marketstreet, along the busy "Jong Centraal", a number of spies in guise stood out in the crowd.' (Ibrahim 1941:25)<sup>23</sup>

Secret agents and spies appear in quite a number of texts, though not necessarily accompanied by such mocking irony. One might say that surveillance constitutes the colonial 'public sphere'. As the term *publiek* constantly rumbles through the novels in question, some brief thoughts about the 'phantom public sphere' (Robbins 1993) in the Netherlands East Indies seem appropriate here.

The term 'public sphere' as it developed being a part of the western-bourgeois intellectual history and ideology is in itself a questionable construct. The Dutch colonial power had, undoubtedly, no interest at all in transferring either the idea or practice of the western 'public sphere' or 'public opinion' to the colonies. Both would have been tantamount to introducing democracy. No colonial rule could ever allow, much less guarantee, an institutionalized platform for public and critical discussions focusing on the practice of political power, let alone tolerate a constant control of governmental activities. The Dutch did, however, introduce some minor fragments of their concept of 'public sphere' to the Indonesians, but not without prior modification (Jedamski 1992:158). Thus, it is not astounding after all that at least the term was frequently used in Indonesian publications. But what exactly did it stand for? It was apparently not understood as the place to position individuality in its relation to society as it was the essence of the western understanding of the term:

'The bourgeois subjects do not conceive of themselves merely as single individuals wishing to determine and express their egos in full sovereignty — they cultivate public interest; they constitute public opinion. The private aspect raises a public claim. The bourgeois subject regards himself as the absolute subject whose ego is generalizable. The generalization takes place as a public act; the ego determines itself in public. To this corresponds the interest of the public for private matters.' (Obermeit 1980:62.)

A closer look at the usage of the term *publiek* in the texts discloses that the Indonesian understanding of the term primarily refers to the material side of it: people, though not seen as individuals. Friends, neighbours and colleagues being the direct social environment represent only one part of the 'public sphere'. *Publiek* is often synonymous with *orang banjak* — many people: walking in the streets, people coming together, forming groups and crowds, people as they talk to each other and about each other, and also

'Distraat straat mata mata rahasia tiada koerang koerangnja memperhatikan menatap dengan mata jang tadjam, bersinar-sinar tertoeedjoe kepada toeboeh gerak langkah orang-orang jang laloe lintas, berdjalan kaki dan sekalipoen kepada penoempang-penoempang bendi dan taxi jang silang sioer didjalan djalanan. Disana, dipasarstraat, disepandjang 'Jong Centraal' jang sangat ramai diantara manoesia jang banjak itoe nampak beberapa orang mata-mata rahasia sedang mereka memakai pakaian jang bersamar.'

people who are watching and being watched. Accordingly, *publiek* is closely linked to public places. The traditional 'public places' such as the market, the well or mosque are replaced by modern ones: city squares, fairs, cinemas, theatres, or simply the concrete side-walks. *Publiek* is an anonymous crowd at one moment and becomes an audience the next:

'As it is actually the habit of the Chinese and native public that always only gathered if there was something to watch, so it happened that time too when people stopped to see that young woman who had fallen victim, blood dripping from her head' (Injo Bian Hin 1930:2).<sup>24</sup>

The audience is a mute audience, not displaying any reactions, not giving any comments, quietly watching. When the audience starts to act, to react, it is no longer merely a crowd in the street, but turns into a community of witnesses:

'Suddenly there was a commotion among the public that had pleasurably been strolling along the big road. Throngs of people approached the place on the riverside where usually pebbles were collected. [...] The public was immediately shocked. Within a few seconds the place was covered with people. The majority of them felt horrified when they saw the scene, it made their hair stand on end. There was not a single person among the crowd that would have dared or would have liked to touch the corpse.' (Djarens 1939:40)<sup>25</sup>

In some cases, an entire city seems to be turned into such a community by the author's description of the people's reaction on a certain event. Here, one might be inclined to speak of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983).

'Many people in Betawi believed that Biang Tian was guilty, just as he was being accused of. In fact, many people hoped he would soon be hanged, so that the soul of Poet Sing would be satisfied' (Tio le Soei 1922:36).<sup>26</sup>

Sometimes, these 'imagined communities' come to feel like a single heart, even crossing city boundaries:

All their hearts were pounding. It seemed not only their hearts, but thousands of hearts were pounding at that moment. All the attention from the entire city of Medan and even from outside the city was focused on that small spot. Thousands

<sup>24</sup> 'Seperti memang ada kabiasahannya publik Tionghoa dan Boemipoetra, jang selaloe tjoema datang boeat menonton, begitoe poen tempo itoe hal terdjadi zonder terkatjoeali, dimana orang soedah tinggal lia tin itoe prampoean moeda mangsan dengan kepala kaloe ar dara.'

<sup>25</sup> 'Tiba-tiba poeblik jang sedang enak-enak didjalan raja itoe djadi gempar. Orang-orang berbondong-bondong pergi ketempat orang mengambil kersik dipinggir soengai Deli [...]. Segera djoega poeblik terkedjoet. Dalam waktoe jang singkat ramailah orang kesana. [...] Kebanyakan publik itoe merasa ngeri melihat pemandangan itoe, meremangkan boeloe tengkoek. Seorang poen ta' ada poela jang berani atau maoe akan mengambil majat itoe.'

<sup>26</sup> 'Seantero Betawi djoega rata-rata ada pertjaja, Biang Tian betoel ada berdosa, sebagaimana ditoedoe padanja. Malahan tiada sedikit orang mengharep-harep, is nanti lekas djadi setan-pengantoengan, soepaja rohnja Poet Sing bisa mendjadi poeas.'

of hearts were waiting impatiently..., waiting while beating hard... what was going to happen?' (Sou'yb 1939:60.)<sup>27</sup>

Both examples also indicate the novel thought of a 'public sphere' as represented by the phenomenon 'public opinion'. Abandoning the concrete voices of people, the public opinion is phantomized, reappearing as 'many mouths and lips':

'Every single mouth, every single lip was discussing the matter' (Sou'yb 1939:57).

And:

The incident became the talk of the town [the fruit of many people's lips], in particular of the old people, because it was appropriate to pay attention to an event like that. From mouth to mouth, and after having discussed it at length, the conversation was closed with a remark such as: What a fate! How sad, poor Siti Zahari (Decha 1940:62.)<sup>28</sup>

Gossip is accepted as much as the press as contributor to the 'public opinion'. Both are mostly treated as serious sources of information, although higher authority is ascribed to the written and printed word of the press. While the press in most cases symbolizes the authoritative voice of the public, it sometimes even appears omniscient. No secret can be hidden from it:

'When she heard the news, Osnar was shaken to her bones and her face turned pale, not a single drop of blood seemed to flow in her veins for fear and anxiety brought about by the event on the Fancy Fair. She had not even told her parents yet, and now, without any warning, it was out in the open, exposed in the newspaper!' (Ibrahim 1941:29.)<sup>29</sup>

Although materialized in single articles written by individual journalists (who never happen to be mentioned in any of the texts), the opinion spread by the press always maintains its public validity. News is seemingly

<sup>27</sup> 'Semoea hati berdebar-debar. Agaknja, boekan hati mereka sadja, bahkan riboean hati sekarang berdebar-debar. Segenap minat, dari seloeroeh kota Medan, dan dari loear kota Medan, sekarang tertoe djadi kelingkoengan tempat jang ketjil itoe. Riboean hati sekarang menanti nanti... menanti dengan hati berdebar... apa jang akan terdjadi.'

<sup>28</sup> 'Setiap moeloet, setiap bibir memperbintangkan hal itoe', and:

'Perkara ini djadi boeah bibir orang banjak, apalagi bagi orang toea-toea, karena kedjadian jang demikian patoet djadi perhatian. Dari moeloet kemoeloet, sesoedah membitjarakan pandjang lebar, dihabsi sadja dengan oetjapan: "Memang sedih nasib Siti Zahari [...]".'

This text passage is particularly interesting because of the hero's reaction to the rumours spread by the 'many mouths and lips'. In a letter to all newspapers, he, Gagak Hitam, explains what really happened. He ends the letter with the words: 'Dengan ini hapoeslah kiranja persangkaan publik kepada pemoeda kita Darma jang soetji itoe' — 'Hopefully, with this the public's accusations towards the noble young Darma will come to an end.' (p. 63)

<sup>19</sup> 'Seketika mendengar kabar itoe maka gementarlah sendi toelang Osnar serta poetjatlah moekanja, tiada berdarah setitik djoepoen lagi karena takoet dan tjemasnja, tersebab kedjadian atas dirinja di Fancy Fair, jang is masih rahasiakan pada iboe bapanja itoe, maka sekarang dengan sekonjong-konjong soedah tersingkap, terboeka didalam soerat kabar.'

nobody's individual responsibility. The following example of a critical attitude towards the press and its actual producers is one of the very few exceptions:

'Already for quite some time people had watched that daring journalist in amazement, first of all his building up and expanding his business, because he himself was the chief editor and director of the journal. [...] For that reason he had an expensive and beautiful office. Humbug theory, he said, meaning that the world wanted to hear lies. But he obviously misjudged the attitude of the majority ["many people"] that did not like to be deceived and which, by experience, was critical.' (Ketjindoean 1941e:54-5.)<sup>30</sup>

Somewhat timidly, the quoted passage also alludes to a critical, well-informed or, more precisely, experienced public outside the press media. One that not only cares about being well informed, but one that is capable of distinguishing right from wrong, truth from lie. To what extent the western-bourgeois ideal of a knowledgeable, critical, committed public served as a model here has to be left open for the moment. The press in all its manifestations is a product of the city. It is as much the voice of the public as it is the voice of the city and sometimes it becomes the narrator's voice, too, narrating city life. Complete (fictitious) articles are interwoven in the texts and take over the narrator's function. As a result, an air of objectivity, realism, and community is created.<sup>31</sup>

Instead of a summary, I would like to conclude this article with a brief discussion of 'The corrupted life of a Big City' by Mas Marco Kartodikromo<sup>32</sup>. The text - not a novel but a short story - displays a wide range of modern elements. However, anyone expecting an intricate plot, highly developed characters or a refined language will be disappointed; technically, the story certainly has its shortcomings. Nowadays, the programmatic contents, the socio-political criticism and revolutionary statements, too, are likely to appear simplified and slightly obtrusive. It is important to keep in mind the circumstances of that time, the author's intention and the target readership. The political message, however, is not the focus of attention here.

This story, altogether only five pages long, demonstrates the striking duality of the perception of modernity in Indonesia in the 1920s: the general fascination and excitement with regard to technology on the one

<sup>30</sup> "Telah lama sekali orang heran melihatkan seorang djoernalis sangat berani sekali kemoeka, teroetama didalam membesarkan peroesahaannya, karena ia sendiri jang mendjadi kepala radaksi dan directeur dari peroesahaan soerat kabar itoe. [...] Oleh sebab itoe kantornja diboeatnja bagoes dan mahal. "Humbug-theorie", katanja, jaitoe doenia ini soeka didjoestail. Akan tetapi ia roepanja tidak kenal akan sifat orang banjak, jang tidak soekai diaboiei matanja, jang kritis karena banjak pengalaman."

<sup>31</sup> This narrative strategy is not uncommon in western 'city' literature either (see Klotz 1969:419-28).

<sup>32</sup> Instead of the original version — published as early as 1924-25 in the daily *Api* — I use Tickells translation of the story (1981).

hand, and, on the other hand, a deep moral concern and anxiety. 'City' is full of contradictions, captivating and appalling at the same time. The literary merits of Mas Marco's short story lie in its amazingly modern narrative devices. It portrays city life as if seen through the eye of a camera, presenting only fragments of individual life stories, glimpses of situations and events. In contrast to the novels discussed earlier, 'city' is not a mere backdrop but the explicit cause of things, the cause of joy, excitement, entertainment, but also poverty, prostitution, and social injustice; it is the actual 'protagonist' of the story. The biographical background of the two workers who, after a political meeting in the centre of the city, decide to go for a stroll before returning home, is omitted, for, in this context, it is of no relevance. They are observers, chroniclers and interpreters of city life: they are 'political flaneurs'.

The story is subdivided into six passages. The first passage starts off with the description of a village at night time in contrast to the bustling night-life in the big city. The formulas used to depict the buzzing noise, the buildings, the traffic or public places resemble the ones that appear later in the novels. Apart from giving this general picture of city life, the first passage also makes a shy analytical attempt:

'Those who go to the cinema and other types of theatre are, for the most part, workers. They don't go to the pictures because they have money just to throw away, but for entertainment and as diversion from their workaday toil on the wharves, in workshops and other places where they make a living.' (p. 19)

The second passage zooms in on the political meeting that the two workers are attending. The author gives only fractions of the discussion and, interestingly enough, does not even try to use the dialogues to convey political views. When the meeting comes to its end, the two workers step out into the urban night-life and into the third passage of the text. They have not yet decided where to go or what to do, when they pass by the exclusive Heerenrestaurant in Heerenstraat:

' "Look... look at that!" Goeno said to Dirdjo pulling at his sleeve and pointing towards the restaurant. "On Saturdays, that place is usually packed right up until day-break with rich *tuans* having a good time. You should see the cars they drive. Hell, are they long!" ' (p. 20)

Despite the extra costs involved, they decide to take the tram to Willemsplein, to walk around there for a while — 'to see the sights of Surabaya at night' (p. 20) — before taking the last tram home. Full details are given of how they run for the tram, hop on board, pay the fare and closely watch the conductor doing his work. In this paragraph the general fascination in technology clearly shows, but in contrast to the novels published years later, this story does not just accept and admire, but wants to understand and explain this technology:



'Unlike steam trams pulled by a locomotive, there was no noise to be heard. With steam trams it was easy for passengers to tell they were coming, because you could hear the 'bros... bros... bros' from the locomotive's chimney. Electric trams were so quiet because they were driven by electricity, which was fed into the motors through a iron rod on the roof.' (p. 21)

Then, once again, anger and moral indignation prevail over the feeling of fascination; they see a homeless person sleeping in a doorway and later watch prostitutes ('busy, modern and famous Surabaya's "decorations" ') selling themselves to sailors while a policeman is turning his back. The author, like the authors of the discussed novels, leaves no doubt that, in his eyes, 'city' corrupts moral values, particularly the moral values of women. Different to his colleagues, however, Mas Marco links his observations to a wider interpretation of society and keeps pointing out the political momentum and responsibility:

'The great city of Surabaya is really quite beautiful... and busy too. Lots of people live here, but in this great and beautiful city there are things which make you sad — things which most people just ignore, by turning their heads if they see something unpleasant. So Surabaya is not just a great and beautiful city, but a nest of degradation, poverty and insults.' (p. 22)

I hope that this contribution, as fragmentary as it is, did convincingly show that the imaginative mind games of Indonesian writers deserve more scholarly attention. I also hope to have related a first impression of how differently modernization processes and literary reflection of the same need to be interpreted in a western and a colonial context respectively. Most of all, the interrelation between the two should not be forgotten.

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