

Beyond the Negotiation between Tradition and Innovation in the Continuity of Art: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of the Body in Balinese *Wayang Tantri*

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Abstract

Studies of Balinese art have often approached artistic continuity through a dichotomy between tradition and innovation an approach that often neglects the existential dimension of artistic creation. In studies of *Wayang Tantri* in particular, this framework has likewise been used to interpret creativity as the outcome of negotiation between tradition and innovation. However, the principle of *kawi dalang* fundamentally unsettles this view, as it presupposes difference and novelty as inherent conditions of the *dalang's* (puppeteer) creative practice. This article proposes an alternative perspective that moves beyond such dichotomous assumptions by approaching *Wayang Tantri* as a mode of artistic existence in which meaning emerges from the *dalang's* embodied experience rather than from a static opposition between traditional forms and creative novelty that marginalizes the subject. The study adopts a qualitative philosophical methodology, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to examine creativity in *Wayang Tantri*. The findings show that, when situated within an existential dimension, creativity entails an understanding of art and the body as inseparable. Artistic expression unfolds through the historical situatedness of the *dalang's* body within a continuously enacted relationship with the world, which constitutes the field in which artistic meaning is disclosed. These findings challenge the dichotomous tradition innovation framework, including the notion of "negotiation," which implicitly reifies art as a mere object of observation. Accordingly, *Wayang Tantri* is understood as a living, dynamic, and relational artistic phenomenon, in which existential experience provides an epistemological foundation for understanding Balinese art and serves as a source of truth in artistic practice.

Keywords: *Wayang Tantri*; Tradition and Innovation; Embodiment; Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Abstrak

*Kajian mengenai kesenian Bali umumnya memahami kontinuitas seni melalui dikotomi antara tradisi dan inovasi, sebuah pendekatan yang kerap mengabaikan dimensi eksistensial dalam proses penciptaan seni. Dalam kajian *Wayang Tantri* khususnya, kerangka ini juga digunakan untuk menafsirkan kreativitas sebagai hasil negosiasi antara tradisi dan inovasi. Namun, prinsip *kawi dalang* justru mematahkan pandangan tersebut, karena *kawi dalang* selalu mengandaikan hadirnya perbedaan dan kebaruan sebagai bagian inheren dari praktik kreatif *dalang*. Artikel ini mencoba menawarkan perspektif alternatif untuk melampaui pandangan dikotomis tersebut, dengan memahami *Wayang Tantri* sebagai suatu modus eksistensi seni, di mana makna lahir dari pengalaman penubuhan *dalang*, bukan dari oposisi statis antara bentuk tradisional dan kebaruan kreatif yang mengabaikan kedudukan subjek. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif-filosofis, dengan fenomenologi Merleau-Ponty untuk menelaah kreativitas *Wayang Tantri*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan kreativitas *Wayang**

Tantri di dalam dimensi eksistensial memandang seni dan tubuh tidak dapat dipisahkan. Ekspresi seni berlangsung melalui historisitas tubuh dalang dalam relasi yang diadakan secara terus-menerus dengan dunia, yang sekaligus menjadi medan tersingkapnya makna seni. Temuan tersebut menantang kerangka dikotomis tradisi dan inovasi, termasuk gagasan “negosiasi” yang secara implisit mereifikasi seni sebagai objek pengamatan semata. Dengan demikian, Wayang Tantri dipahami sebagai fenomena artistik yang hidup, dinamis, dan relasional, di mana pengalaman eksistensial menjadi landasan epistemologis bagi pemahaman kesenian Bali, sekaligus menempatkannya sebagai sumber kebenaran dalam seni.

Kata Kunci: Wayang Tantri; Tradisi dan Inovasi; Penubuhan; Fenomenologi Merleau-Ponty

Introduction

Wayang Tantri emerged as a Balinese *wayang* genre that developed in the late twentieth century. Its first documented appearance is attributed to the *dalang* I Made Persib, who introduced it at a national arts event in Bandung in 1980 (Ardiyasa, 2020). In subsequent years, the genre was further developed and popularized among Balinese audiences by the *dalang* I Wayan Wija Wicaksandita et al., (2020) and later expanded by other puppeteers, including *dalang* Tunjung (Goodlander, 2013). This historical trajectory indicates that *Wayang Tantri* is not an artistic creation arising from an autonomous subjectivity identified solely with a single puppeteer; rather, it is a form defined by openness within the puppeteering community itself.

In other words, the form evolves through the creative contributions of multiple artistic subjects (*dalang*). The openness that characterizes creativity in *Wayang Tantri* is central to this study, particularly given a gap in scholarship on the trajectories of Balinese artistic development. Accordingly, this article examines *Wayang Tantri* as an expression of creativity that emerged in the late twentieth century and continued to evolve into the twenty-first. Existing research on *Wayang Tantri* remains relatively limited in both number and scope; most studies concentrate on formal, narrative, and aesthetic concerns, as seen in the works of (Murtana, 1996; Sukma, 2015; Wicaksandita, 2019; Ardiyasa, 2020; and Kodi, 2021).

Beyond these contributions, Goodlander's *Wayang Tantri in Bali* (2013) offers a more explicitly analytical account, arguing that the genre's emergence resulted from negotiations between two seemingly opposing poles: tradition and innovative experimentation. Such a perspective remains rooted in a dualistic and ultimately reductive framework. Within this view, art is repeatedly interpreted through binary oppositions, a tendency with significant implications for its ontological status in relation to the existential domain. In response to this limitation, the present study offers a philosophical reflection that moves beyond approaches treating artworks merely as objects of detached analysis.

Under such reductive assumptions, the creativity of *Wayang Tantri* is often understood only as a negotiated compromise between tradition and progress. This interpretation, however, risks obscuring the most fundamental dimension of artistic practice: the artist's lived experience as a creative subject. It continues to rely on a dichotomous schema in which preservation and innovation are positioned as opposing trajectories that mutually negate one another, thereby casting art as a site of reconciliation between these forces.

By contrast, this study proceeds from the premise that art must be situated within its existential domain as a living, embodied experience rather than treated as an object

readily subjected to analytical reduction. To address this conceptual gap, interpreting *Wayang Tantri* requires a more fundamental approach one capable of overcoming the constraints imposed by dualistic views of artistic continuity. The central question is not merely whether this performance tradition aligns more closely with “tradition” or with “innovation,” but how their relationship can be understood through the existential dimension of artistic experience. Accordingly, this study adopts a phenomenological mode of inquiry that approaches *Wayang Tantri* as an expression of artistic continuity in Bali, grounded in how art becomes present in the immediacy of lived experience rather than through distanced or elevated (eternal) analytical perspectives. In this context, phenomenology offers a means of tracing the existential roots of art by situating it in the body, understood as an embodied subject existing in the world through which artistic meaning emerges (Widdershoven, 1999).

Within Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological framework, the body is understood not merely as a biological entity but as a living, expressive subject. In other words, the body must be recognized as the fundamental site where subject and world are intertwined Syamsuddin (2010) enabling worldly meaning to be disclosed through artistic expression (Henshaw, 2023). Thus, what may appear as novelty in art is not a deviation from tradition but an expression of tradition itself one that continues to unfold through the lived experience of the embodied subject.

The urgency of this study lies in its effort to offer a new perspective on the development of Balinese *wayang*. By shifting the analytical focus from the dichotomous “tradition versus innovation” framework to embodiment as the existential sphere from which artistic dynamics emerge this research broadens our understanding of the evolution of Balinese performing arts while also contributing to phenomenological studies of art. The study’s significance is not limited to explaining artistic continuity as a function of novelty; rather, it seeks to clarify how the embodied subject in artistic practice serves as a bridge between the persistence of tradition and the shifting movements of historical time. From this perspective, art is understood not as a fixed entity but as a living practice that continually unfolds and acquires meaning.

Method

This study employs a qualitative philosophical design with a phenomenological orientation to interpret the existential meaning of *Wayang Tantri*. Using a literature-based approach, it proceeds from the premise that a performance form should not be treated merely as an artistic object ready for detached analysis, but as a structure of meaning that unfolds across historical, existential, and cultural horizons. Accordingly, literature-based research can provide substantial analytical depth when it engages rigorously developed arguments and critically examined interpretations from relevant academic sources. This study adopts a descriptive analytical approach. The descriptive dimension articulates in detail the position of art and the sphere of adaptation as they respond to sociocultural dynamics. By contrast, the analytical dimension examines the interrelation between these two aspects in the production of continuity that resists dichotomous framing. Data were collected through an extensive review of primary and secondary sources, including prior studies, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other materials relevant to the object of inquiry (Asipi et al., 2022). These sources include studies on *Wayang Tantri* as primary data, alongside works on Balinese *pewayangan* as supporting materials. In addition, Merleau-Ponty’s major philosophical writings, together with related scholarly interpretations, were examined to define the formal object of the study and to establish the philosophical perspective guiding the analysis. Through close reading, the researcher identifies recurring conceptual and narrative patterns that illuminate how artistic practice

can articulate collective identity (tradition) while remaining open to renewal. Analysis proceeded iteratively in three stages: (1) reduction, in which key concepts and arguments were identified and grouped; (2) display, in which the grouped material was arranged into a coherent interpretive account; and (3) verification, in which conclusions were drawn in relation to the central research problem. To maintain analytical rigor, the study is anchored in the methodological principles of philosophical inquiry, historical continuity, heuristic analysis, and a holistic approach (Bakker and Zubair, 2007).

Results and Discussion

1. The Historicity of *Wayang Tantri*

The emergence of *Wayang Tantri* marks an important phase in the late-twentieth-century development of Balinese puppetry. The genre reflects the dynamic character of Balinese art, which continues to transform in response to social, cultural, and political shifts, including changes in cultural policy. Against the backdrop of new *wayang* genres that appeared across the twentieth century, *Wayang Tantri* has come to signify innovation and the creative vitality of Balinese artists. An early documented performance of *Wayang Tantri* took place in 1980 at the National Wayang Festival held at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (*Institut Kesenian Indonesia*) in Bandung.

Presented by the dalang I Made Persib then a student at ASTI Denpasar the performance featured the story of *Pedanda Baka*. This narrative offers a moral allegory that addresses hypocrisy and the Janus-faced character of religious authority figure Ardiyasa (2020) a theme that later became characteristic of *Wayang Tantri*, which typically portrays animals acting in human-like ways. Following the festival, *Wayang Tantri* underwent further formal development and gained wider recognition through the work of I Wayan Wija of Sukawati, who introduced distinctive artistic features and positioned the genre within broader currents of contemporary Balinese art (Ardiyasa, 2020).

Wija's version of *Wayang Tantri* subsequently gained broad public recognition, exemplifying a process of negotiation between creative innovation and the *kawi dalang* tradition (Goodlander, 2013). Although the performance structure continued to follow established patterns of Balinese *wayang*, Wija introduced significant innovations in narrative content, gamelan accompaniment, and puppet characterization. From a historical perspective, however, *Wayang Tantri* also reveals a complex layering of genealogy: Wija's work is often regarded as an original creation despite the existence of an earlier version performed by Persib. This shift suggests that the emergence of *Wayang Tantri* was not a singular event but the outcome of a dynamic, continuous process embedded within Balinese cultural life.

The emergence of *Wayang Tantri* cannot be separated from the cultural policies of Indonesia's New Order government, which were institutionalized in Bali through LISTIBYA (the Council for Cultural Guidance and Development), established in 1966. LISTIBYA was formed in response to growing concerns about the potential erosion of Balinese traditional values under the influence of tourism, while also functioning as a political instrument for regulating the arts in accordance with national ideology (Umeda, 2006).

The policies implemented by LISTIBYA played a crucial role in shaping the orientation of Balinese arts, particularly after the 1971 Seminar on Sacred and Profane Arts, which established three official classifications of Balinese art: *wali* (sacred), *bebali* (semi-sacred), and *balih-balihan* (profane). This classification, however, carried significant implications for Balinese *wayang*, which was designated as *bebali* a categorization that, in practice, obscured the dalang's spiritual role and the religious

dimension of *wayang* performance (Umeda, 2006). This perspective later drew criticism, most notably from Rota (1978), who argued that Balinese *wayang* simultaneously encompasses all three categories (Umeda, 2006).

In addition to its classificatory role, LISTIBYA also served as a driving force behind major arts festivals in Bali, such as the Gong Kebyar Festival (1968) and the All-Balinese Wayang Festival (1971). These events encouraged the emergence of new evaluative criteria centered on the dalang's theatrical abilities (Hinzler, 1981). This shift redirected puppetry from a primarily ritual orientation toward aesthetic and performative dimensions, thereby opening space for innovation and experimentation in performance forms. Within this context, Balinese *wayang* began to undergo a subtle process of secularization without entirely abandoning its religious roots.

These policies and cultural dynamics were further reinforced by the establishment of the Indonesian Academy of Dance Arts (ASTI) Denpasar in 1967, which became a formal educational institution for aspiring dalang and Balinese artists. Within this institutional setting, artistic creativity gained an academic platform that emphasized innovation and the production of new works as integral components of students' final projects. The convergence of government policies, institutional support, and living local traditions created fertile cultural conditions for the emergence of new wayang genres. Works that appeared during this period included *Wayang Arja* by I Made Sidja, *Wayang Tantri* by I Wayan Wija, and *Wayang Babad* by I Gusti Ngurah Seramasemadi (Wicaksana, 2005). These works reflect Balinese artists' creative responses to the demands of their historical moment, in which tradition was not abandoned but mobilized as a foundation for generating new forms that resonated with the conditions of modernity.

Thus, *Wayang Tantri* should not be understood merely as an autonomous artistic product but as the outcome of a complex intersection of cultural policy, formal education, and local traditional dynamics. It emerged amid sociopolitical changes that called for a reinterpretation of Balinese artistic identity. Through *Wayang Tantri*, Balinese artists not only revitalized the moral narratives of the Tantri tales but also affirmed the vitality of tradition within an ever-evolving cultural landscape. In this context, *Wayang Tantri* stands as a symbol of both continuity and transformation in Balinese art, negotiating between ritual and aesthetics, tradition and modernity, and state authority and the artist's creative freedom.

2. Transformation of Tantri in Balinese *Pedalangan*

The adaptation of Tantri literature into *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) represents a significant development in Wija's efforts to establish *Wayang Tantri* as a distinct artistic form. The Tantri narratives appealed to Wija not only for their moral and philosophical depth but also because they aligned with his artistic competencies and personal inclinations. First, his choice was shaped by his proficiency in and fondness for *macepat* melodies, known in Bali as *sekar alit*. These encompass a wide range of traditional poetic forms, including *sinom*, *semarandana*, *pangkur*, *durma*, *dandanggula*, *ginanti*, *ginada*, *pucung*, *maskumambang*, and *mijil*.

Second, Wija sought to further develop *tatikesan* (gestural and movement techniques) in shadow puppetry, referred to in the Javanese tradition as *sabetan*. Third, he was drawn to the ethical teachings and philosophical reflections embedded in the Tantri tales. Beyond these considerations, Wija consciously positioned his creative work within Balinese folk narrative traditions, thereby anchoring his innovations in the cultural memory and moral imagination of the Balinese community. Inspiration drawn from literary sources often regarded as a foundation for shaping *wayang kulit* narratives should not be understood in a rigid or narrowly defined sense.

This is evident in the development of *lakon* (dramatic plots), which typically involves variations in reception, interpretation, and creative reworking of stories drawn from multiple sources. Such processes are shaped by the performer's breadth of knowledge as well as the specific characteristics of their cultural background (Karja and Feldman, 2024). In Bali, the transmission of narrative-literary knowledge is predominantly oral, despite the preservation of numerous ancient manuscripts. Consequently, storytellers continually reinterpret the texts they convey rather than reproducing them in fixed or standardized forms. The same principle applies to the *lakon-lakon* presented in Balinese *wayang kulit* performances, where interpretation and improvisation constitute central elements of the performative process. The development of Balinese literature much of which has been shaped by the legacy of Old Javanese literary traditions has unfolded through the distinctive expressive modes and interpretive styles of individual Balinese poets.

This is likewise evident in Tantri literature, which in Bali has evolved into a range of genres, including prose (*gancaran*) and verse forms such as *kakawin* and *kidung*. The Old Javanese Tantri texts themselves are adaptations of the Indian *Pañcatantra*, translated and reworked into Old Javanese prose (Dewi et al., 2025). A common feature of translating literary texts into diverse artistic media in Bali is a dynamic and flexible mode of interpretation. Such practices unfold through an open, adaptive understanding in which it is common to place one text in dialogue with another.

Traditional activities such as *mabēbasan* a communal practice of literary discussion and interpretive reading are conducted without strict adherence to the written text, in contrast to more rigid approaches often associated with academic intellectual traditions. This practice illustrates how classical literary works acquire meaning, undergo interpretation, and are transformed within Balinese society. Consequently, processes of adaptation and rearticulation across genres occur frequently, as evidenced by the continued emergence of works derived from the Old Javanese *Tantri Kāmandaka*. These works remain subject to ongoing reinterpretation and renewed expression among *anak nyasta* practitioners and enthusiasts of traditional literary and interpretive culture.

In general, the activities of *anak nyasta* encompass a range of interpretive and performative engagements, including *nguacen* (reading), *nurun* (copying), *masanin*, *negesin*, and *ngartos* (rephrasing, translating, or interpreting into Balinese). These practices open a wide spectrum of possibilities, including misreadings, transcriptional variations, and shifts in meaning or interpretation. Semantic change and interpretive variation are therefore highly likely, reflecting the diverse heuristic competencies of individual readers (Gitananda, 2014).

This phenomenon helps explain Zoetmulder's observation that literary texts transmitted across generations frequently undergo modification or deviate from earlier forms. Available evidence further suggests that texts originating outside Bali were not simply adopted but were actively received and reinterpreted within the sociocultural and religious frameworks of Balinese tradition (Gitananda, 2014). Within the Balinese puppetry (*pedalangan*) tradition, comparable dynamics are implicitly present, although the medium and modes of expression differ. In a typical *wayang kulit* performance, the literary narrative that serves as a source for a play is neither presented nor elaborated in a fixed manner; rather, the principal storyline functions as a guiding framework.

In many instances, the full literary work is not performed in its entirety; instead, selected episodes are drawn upon according to their relevance to the specific performance context. This practice is widely accepted because Balinese *wayang kulit* performances are frequently embedded in ritual settings and are commonly shaped by the principle of *desa kala patra* that is, adaptation to place, time, and circumstance. Consequently, *wayang*

performance in Bali is fundamentally situational rather than purely textual. This characteristic is also evident in *Wayang Tantri*, where contextual conditions play a decisive role in shaping both the selection of narrative material and the dalang's interpretive approach. Performances by I Wayan Wija widely recognized as the creator and principal performer of *Wayang Tantri* illustrate this tendency clearly, particularly through the incorporation of patrons' ongoing ritual activities into the dramatic structure of the performance.

Within this performative context, it is common for the events depicted in a *wayang* performance to portray characters engaged in religious rituals. It is also common for opposing characters absent from the original literary sources to be introduced into the storyline. Conversely, certain *wayang* genres may at times draw on entirely different texts as narrative sources. This condition reflects the dalang's interpretive freedom as it emerges from the interplay between lived experience and performance demands. A similar phenomenon can be observed in *Wayang Tantri*.

Although the genre is frequently associated with the Tantri literary corpus, in the 1990s the dalang I Wayan Wija performed a *carangan* (improvised) play entitled *Bhagawan Dadici*, based on the *Lingga Purana* a text with no direct connection to Tantri literature. Nevertheless, Wija's staging preserved a distinctly Tantri atmosphere by incorporating animal figures as central characters. As Sukma (2015) notes, Wija's intention was to broaden the narrative scope of the performance and avoid monotony. To accommodate such flexibility particularly in character representation Balinese dalang commonly adapt pre-existing puppet figures to suit new roles, a technique known as *wanda*.

Through this practice, a single puppet figure may embody two or more distinct characters within a single performance (Darmawan et al., 2023). According to Sedana (2019) the guiding principle in selecting *wayang* figures is that the chosen puppets should correspond to the general character type required by a given narrative. For example, a refined *ksatria* (noble hero) figure may represent an elegant protagonist; a refined female puppet may portray a queen; a soldier figure with narrow eyes may symbolize the protagonist's forces, whereas a soldier figure with round eyes may represent the antagonist's troops. This principle of *wanda* the practice of using a single puppet to represent multiple roles was also applied in *Wayang Tantri* performances.

As Wicaksandita (2019) notes, Wija employed *wanda* in the play *Bhagawan Kundala Nangun Yadnya*, particularly when the character Sang Suratma (originally drawn from Balinese *Wayang Parwa*) was cast as Sang Kuntala, the son of Bhagawan Kasyapa. Wija further explained that a dalang may reuse a single figure across different performances even when narrative settings or thematic contexts differ, because the dalang retains artistic discretion to adapt puppet usage to the demands of each performance (DeBoer et al., 1992). Accordingly, both narrative selection and the use of puppet figures in *Wayang Tantri* reflect a dynamic and flexible mode of creative development rather than a rigid or fixed system. The dalang's creative impulse continually emerges in response to situational and performative conditions, revealing an improvisational dimension intrinsic to the living tradition of Balinese *wayang*.

3. Dalang's Visual Innovation and Performativity

Wayang Tantri is a *wayang* performance form rooted in the Balinese *pedalangan* tradition while offering a creative reinterpretation of the classical Tantri literary heritage. By adapting Tantri moral narratives allegories of human life articulated through animal characters the genre has generated new expressive possibilities within the *wayang* tradition while maintaining the distinctive visual identity and stylistic sensibilities of

Balinese aesthetics. In the context of modernity and the rapid expansion of tourism, *Wayang Tantri* has emerged as a creative mode that mediates between tradition and contemporary cultural demands.

One of its most notable innovations is the introduction of animal figures with dynamic, articulated movements such as movable legs, necks, wings, and tails which have become a defining feature of the performance. This innovation reflects the dalang's deliberate effort to produce visually compelling spectacles that can respond to and compete with the appeal of modern entertainment media, including film and television. The longer trajectory of *Wayang Tantri* illustrates how innovation and tradition are interwoven within a single creative continuum. The dalang I Wayan Wija occupies a central position in this transformative process.

Through extensive travel and cross-cultural collaboration, he absorbed new sources of inspiration that later found expression in his performances. The incorporation of glass materials and electric light projection to cast the puppets' silhouettes provides evidence of an ongoing dialogue between local cultural practice and modern technology (Wibawa, 2024). This element functions not merely as a technical innovation but also as a symbolic medium: projected light signifies divine power. In this sense, it gives visual form to the principle of *rwabhineda* through the figures of Barong and Rangda, which occupy a central place in Balinese cosmology (Purwanto, 2019).

Wija's creativity is evident not only in his technical innovations but also in his integration of multiple artistic disciplines such as dance and carving into the overall performance structure. His mastery of puppet carving, combined with a deep understanding of Balinese dance movement, enables his figures to display gestures that are more vivid and expressive than those of conventional puppets. This integration enriches the theatrical dimension of *Wayang Tantri*, making it more communicative and engaging for audiences without diminishing its grounding in traditional values. For Wija, innovation does not signify a departure from cultural roots; rather, it serves as a means of sustaining tradition within changing historical conditions.

Within his creative philosophy, the art of *wayang* must continually generate new stylistic expressions and character formations so that the tradition remains relevant and meaningful to contemporary generations. In this sense, *Wayang Tantri* revitalizes tradition through creativity and reflective engagement with present sociocultural realities. As Goodlander (2013) suggests, *Wayang Tantri* demonstrates that cultural preservation is not merely a matter of maintaining form, but of mobilizing the past in ways that allow it to speak meaningfully to the present.

4. Merleau-Ponty, Embodiment, and Art

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body conceives experience as inherently relational within the existential dimension. This relationality affirms the connection between the human subject and the world through embodiment, which constitutes the fundamental ground of human experience and is likewise manifested in artistic practice both in the act of creation and in the experience of encountering art. From this perspective, the body cannot be reduced to a mere instrument or passive object; rather, it functions as a perceiving subject that actively experiences and interprets the world through perception (Attarian and Marasy, 2018).

Such an understanding places the body at the center of existential dynamics, as the locus where meaning emerges and becomes articulated. Within this framework, meaning is not an abstract construction but a living process. In other words, meaning in bodily experience arises from an existential mode in which the body directly encounters and engages with the world (Farha, 2017). Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as le

corps propre, or the “living body,” suggests that the body is never separated from consciousness or from the world; rather, it functions as a point of intersection through which both dimensions are unified (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

The body thus becomes the primary medium through which reality is apprehended, insofar as sensory experience, movement, and human action emerge as an integrated unity continuously engaged with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Within this phenomenological horizon, embodiment makes possible both aesthetic experience and artistic creation, as the creative process unfolds through a body that moves, senses, and expresses itself in relation to the world (Levin, 2016).

In the context of art, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that a work of art cannot be understood merely as an object of observation; rather, it must be approached as an experience involving the embodied presence of both creator and viewer. From this perspective, art expresses the body as it encounters and makes sense of the world, rather than serving as a product of abstract reasoning or logical representation. A work of art whether painting, music, or another form opens a dimension of “depth” that can be felt and experienced only through the presence of the embodied subject (Perez, 2013).

This depth refers to layers of meaning that cannot be grasped through visual observation or intellectual analysis alone but instead emerge through full bodily engagement in both artistic creation and the experience of encountering the artwork (Mazis, 2012). Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on art indicate that the body functions as an irreplaceable medium of expression, particularly in the visual and performing arts. Movement, gesture, rhythm, and sensibility, as disclosed through the body, constitute existential modes through which the world is lived and rendered manifest.

When an artist paints, dances, or performs music, they are not merely engaged in physical activity; rather, they open a horizon of experience that cannot be reduced to visual, symbolic, or linguistic representation. From this perspective, the body becomes the space where artistic meaning is configured where the existential ground of experience takes shape and is transformed into a creative form that can be shared with others. The body thus emerges as the locus in which meaning becomes embodied and directly communicated (Henshaw, 2023). The body’s depth encompassing intuition, affect, memory, and sensory engagement with the world renders the work of art a “trace of the body,” carrying the intentionality of the creator’s lived experience.

From this standpoint, embodiment not only grounds aesthetic experience but also provides a key to understanding how art sustains continuity. The endurance of artistic traditions does not rest solely on the preservation of forms or the formal reproduction of artistic conventions; rather, it emerges from the ongoing ways in which the human body experiences the world and confers meaning upon it. As the source of perception, expression, and creativity, the body enables experience to be transmitted across generations through channels more fundamental than textual records or codified artistic rules (Guentchev, 2018). When the artist’s body moves, reshapes, or renews a creative form, it remains anchored in the basic structure of human experience a structure that remains relatively stable even as cultural expressions evolve.

Thus, artistic continuity rests profoundly on the continuity of the body as a subject that is always present, perceiving, experiencing, and interpreting the world. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty maintains that embodiment constitutes the core of all human experience, including the experience of creating and engaging with art. The body thus becomes both the source of meaning and expression and the creative medium through which art remains alive and capable of transformation across historical periods. This phenomenological framework offers a renewed understanding of artistic continuity: art endures not by virtue of fixed or final aesthetic principles but because the living body continually renews its

relation with the world. From this perspective, artistic continuity can be understood as a field of lived experience in which artistic practices persist, evolve, and generate new forms (Mazis, 2012).

5. Embodiment as a Principle of Continuity in Art

The interplay between inherited forms and the courage to innovate lies at the center of this study. Grounded in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the analysis interprets this tension through the lens of embodiment. Within this framework, *Wayang Tantri* provides a concrete illustration of how Balinese art continues to live through an embodied process that links tradition with the artist's creative experience. *Wayang Tantri* does not merely represent Tantri narratives; rather, it functions as a creative medium through which the dalang integrates new modes of expression emerging from personal experience and from artistic and aesthetic horizons (Tannenbaum, 2017).

The identity of *Wayang Tantri* does not depend on narrative uniformity or a fixed visual style, but on its capacity to revitalize Balinese cultural values through continual reinterpretation. In this sense, each dalang retains the freedom to rework and rearticulate stories, transforming *Wayang Tantri* into a performative space in which tradition and individuality converge in a dynamic and productive balance (Zurbuchen, 1987). The creativity of *Wayang Tantri*, as it unfolds over time, reflects a capacity to absorb and actualize multiple possibilities. In this sense, its creation is not a "once-and-for-all" achievement but an evolutionary process that continually responds to the artist's holistic lived experience as a creative subject (Perez, 2013).

Over the course of its development, *Wayang Tantri* has undergone a series of innovations consistently advanced by the dalang I Wayan Wija, who is widely regarded as its pioneering reformer. Wija's encounters with diverse cultural contexts beyond Bali have also played a significant role in shaping his creative process. Through artistic journeys to various countries and collaborations with international artists, Wija gained insights that enriched both the form and meaning of *Wayang Tantri*. While remaining receptive to external influences, he continued to orient his work toward traditional foundations as an expression of devotion to life.

The roots of Balinese *wayang* thus remain firmly grounded even as they are reworked through an exploratory spirit that generates new forms and characters. From this process emerges a synthesis between tradition and innovation. This creative interplay positions *Wayang Tantri* as an artistic practice deeply rooted in Balinese culture while remaining open to the dynamics of contemporary life (Wicaksandita et al., 2020). The Tantri stories, transmitted across generations, have been sedimented through both written and oral forms within their cultural milieu, thereby providing a durable framework for *wayang* performance. The values embedded in these folk narratives find renewed expression through performance as they are continually reinterpreted in relation to the knowledge, understanding, and experiential horizon of the artistic subject. The emergence of *Wayang Tantri* as a contemporary rearticulation of *wayang* creativity is not detached from its traditional roots; rather, it continues to articulate Balinese artistic identity with particular force. This vitality is inseparable from lived experience what, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, is described as embodiment and thus offers a philosophical basis for addressing dualism, especially the presumed tension between tradition and modernity.

In this context, embodiment invites a reexamination of reductive frameworks that have long dominated the study of art most notably dichotomies between tradition and modernity, and between the conventional and the progressive. Such oppositions reflect the enduring problem of dualism in the history of philosophy, a problem that phenomenology seeks to overcome by offering a mode of thought capable of transcending

rigid classifications and reductive binaries. In the case of *Wayang Tantri*, Goodlander (2013) reinforces these opposed positions through a strict classificatory scheme, thereby implying a process of negotiation between what is deemed conservative and what is considered progressive. However, within Balinese art particularly puppetry there exists a longstanding creative principle that addresses this division differently: *kawi dalang*. This principle situates performance within the specificity of time, place, and circumstance, known as *desa-kala-patra*. It indicates a relational correspondence between the artistic subject (dalang) and the unfolding of the performance itself.

In other words, *desa-kala-patra* foregrounds embodiment by grounding artistic creation in lived, situational conditions of practice (*kawi dalang*). From this perspective, the creativity of a *wayang* performance is inherently situational: each performance in Bali emerges in its own distinctive manner and is never fully repeatable (Sedana, 2019). This is largely because Balinese dalang are not bound to fixed scripts, unlike many theater practitioners in Western traditions (Kocur, 2013). For this reason, the dalang's creative principle (*kawi dalang*) aligns more closely with phenomenological thinking than with mechanical modes of thought.

Embodiment becomes central for understanding *kawi dalang*, insofar as the dynamic form of performance is shaped by the dalang's bodily role as a subject. This process is closely connected to the expressive character of the arts, in which meaning emerges through relations among intersubject and is realized within the sensible realm one rich in affective, expressive, and lived dimensions of significance. From a phenomenological perspective, puppetry therefore appears as a relational event constituted through the interplay among the dalang, collaborators, artistic media, and the audience. For this reason, a *wayang* performance cannot be understood as a completed or static art object comparable to an artifact displayed in a museum (Johnson, 2013). Rather, it is a living artistic practice that continually unfolds through *desa-kala-patra*, underscoring the situational, temporal, and contextual nature of art as it adapts to space, time, and circumstance (Rubin and Sedana, 2007). *Wayang* is thus continuously animated by an embodied subject and never arrives at a final or definitive form. In each performance, the dalang discloses worldly meaning—the narrative and its situational horizon through embodied engagement that becomes materialized in the medium of performance.

This process presupposes that the dalang's body is never separate from the world but always intertwined with it. This understanding corresponds to the concept of the body-subject, in which embodiment constitutes an existential openness to the world. The body-subject suggests that the body is not merely an instrument of expression but also a medium of experience one that both transforms and is transformed by the world-horizon it inhabits (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). This condition is likewise evident in *Wayang Tantri*, which appears not as a finalized artistic product but as a practice that continually evolves. In this sense, *Wayang Tantri* signals the presence of a living world one perpetually renewed through the dynamic relation between the embodied subject and the world it experiences within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework (Guentchev, 2018).

This intertwining supports the view that the dalang continually discloses meaning through embodiment. For Merleau-Ponty, the body constitutes a unity that cannot be explained in isolation or as a mere assemblage of parts, because embodiment forms an integral configuration that organizes the activity of the living body as a whole (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). This embodied experience animates the creative development of *Wayang Tantri*, which continually seeks and finds its form through such moments of interweaving. Indeed, bodily unity or organism is fundamental insofar as it precedes and makes possible bodily experience and relationality itself (Inkpin, 2019).

The dalang, understood as a locus of openness, operates according to *kawi dalang*, through which performance remains in flux in accordance with *desa-kala-patra* (place, time, and circumstance) (Rubin and Sedana, 2007). This condition opens possibilities not only for renewing narrative content but also for creating new character forms and exploring materials as performative media, enabling shadow projection to disclose worldly meaning meaning inseparable from the ongoing interrelation between the embodied subject and the world. In this sense, *wayang* constitutes an existential art form that situates the dalang's existence within the world.

The “world” here refers to the lifeworld: a world inhabited and made meaningful by an embodied subject (Dreyfus and Todes, 1962). In other words, the subject recognizes and engages the world only through the body. Viewing embodiment as a fundamental principle for understanding existence affirms that the emergence of *Wayang Tantri* is rooted in the existential dimension of its creative subject. In this context, Wija positioned himself at the center of the challenges confronting Balinese shadow puppetry, particularly at a historical moment when traditional arts were widely perceived as stagnant and increasingly less relevant amid sociocultural transformation.

This aesthetic and existential unease arises from an awareness that Balinese shadow puppetry faces pressure to become more dynamic and adaptive in response to changing historical conditions. Consequently, audience engagement has tended to decline, as *wayang* performances are often regarded as less compelling than popular entertainment media such as television and film (Goodlander, 2013). This phenomenological perspective offers an epistemological framework for understanding creativity in *wayang*.

Embodiment addresses dualism by resisting interpretations that objectify creativity as something merely observed from the outside, thereby producing reductive readings that treat it as an object. To move beyond this limitation, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology foregrounds the embodied subject as an agent rather than a detached knowing subject. From this standpoint, *Wayang Tantri* must be understood through the presence of the embodied subject as a creative agent within performance. Such a subject is always situated within a particular historical, cultural, and experiential background. Consequently, the relation between the embodied subject (the dalang) and the creativity of *Wayang Tantri* can be grasped as an interwoven, mutually constitutive process one that cannot be adequately captured through reductive approaches.

This is why the present study seeks to establish a foundation for understanding artistic creativity as continually evolving. If creativity is interpreted solely as a negotiation between tradition and innovation, what appears innovative today will eventually become tradition, producing conceptual slippage in how an artwork’s meaning is understood. From this standpoint, embodiment in art should be understood as a form of experiential unity in which past and future converge in the present. Its presence in the here and now when performance unfolds manifests the body as a subject continually oriented toward place, time, and circumstance, with sedimented layers of prior artistic experience and a horizon of creative possibility. Together, these dimensions provide a basis for understanding artistic continuity as an embodied principle.

Conclusion

The novelty of this study lies in three core contributions to a phenomenological understanding of Balinese *wayang* through *Wayang Tantri*. First, it challenges the prevailing tendency to frame *Wayang Tantri* within a rigid tradition innovation dichotomy. Such a perspective often oversimplifies artistic dynamics by assuming that change occurs primarily through rational negotiation between old and new forms. By

contrast, this study shows that the dynamism of *Wayang Tantri* is rooted in relational processes lived by the dalang through moments of embodiment. Renewal, therefore, should not be understood as an external modification of form, but as an internal movement of a living tradition that continually regenerates meaning through bodily experience across historical time. Second, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment, this study argues that artistic meaning in Balinese *wayang* performance emerges from lived experience woven through the relation between body and world. In this context, art does not appear as an abstract representation but as an ontological event that arises from how the dalang's body responds to place, time, and cultural situatedness. This perspective expands the horizon of Balinese aesthetics beyond the analysis of fixed forms toward an inquiry into how meaning is brought forth through embodiment in the creative process. It thereby positions *wayang* as an expression of the body's openness to the world one that continually generates emergent and unpredictable aesthetic possibilities. Third, the study shows that the continuity of Balinese *wayang* rests on the dalang's body as a subject situated temporally, spatially, and culturally. The body thus becomes the locus where creativity unfolds and artistic meaning is disclosed, linking past, present, and future organically. Tradition, therefore, does not congeal into a static artifact but remains alive through a situational body shaped by artistic experience, ritual engagement, social relations, and responsiveness to changing times. From this perspective, *Wayang Tantri* should not be regarded as a cultural artifact transmitted mechanically, but as a manifestation of artistic vitality that persists through a body that feels, responds, and creates. The endurance of Balinese art, in other words, is sustained not by adherence to fixed forms but by the profound intertwinement of body, experience, and a world in constant motion.

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