

Narrative Discourse as Social Critique in Mouly Surya's Sumba Film *Marlina the Murderer in Four Act*

Bunga Islammy^{a,1,*}

^a Faculty of Cultural Science, Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

¹ bunga25018@mail.unpad.ac.id*

ORCID: ¹ 0000-0000-0000-0000

* Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
Indonesian scholarship on Mouly Surya's 2017 feature set in Sumba has concentrated almost entirely on what the film represents: gender injustice, feminist symbolism, and female resistance to patriarchal custom. How that representation is organised as discourse has remained unexamined. This article analyses the film as an audiovisual narrative text in order to establish how its formal organisation carries an argument about sexual violence. The study applies Gerard Genette's narratology to the complete 93-minute film, read through three stages of viewing conducted between February and May 2025, with every observation logged by timecode against the five categories of order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice; Laura Mulvey's critique of the gaze and Cathy Caruth's account of traumatic memory are introduced as interpretive lenses at the point of discussion. The analysis finds an almost unbroken linear order across four titled acts, with analepsis withheld precisely where the protagonist's past and her post-violence state would conventionally invite it; a duration that expands when power relations shift, compresses movement that does not alter the conflict, and elides the aftermath of killing; a strictly singulative frequency; a mood that migrates between internal, zero, and external focalisation so that victimhood is distributed across two women without the victim's body becoming spectacle; and a voice that remains heterodiegetic and extradiegetic throughout, refusing the protagonist verbal authority over her own story. Together these choices constitute a structural refusal of the social demand that survivors repeatedly explain and prove their experience.	Ellipsis Focalisation Gender-based violence Narratology Trauma  This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

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INTRODUCTION

The meaning of a film is produced as much by the manner of its telling as by the events it recounts. Two films may relate substantially identical incidents and yet yield entirely different viewing experiences, because the sequence in which events are disclosed, the screen time

granted to each, the number of times an incident is narrated, the vantage from which it is perceived, and the agency through which it is transmitted have each been arranged differently. This premise underlies the structural study of narrative, which treats a narrative not as neutral content but as the residue of a series of formal decisions (Genette, 1980). Herman and Vervaeck (2019) insist that the analysis of representation and the analysis of narrative structure occupy two distinct analytical layers, since findings about what a text represents do not of themselves explain how the discourse constructs that representation. A film may display violence against women explicitly through dialogue and incident, yet the question of how a spectator is directed to experience, endure, or hold that violence at a distance can only be answered once the organisation of its discourse has also been read.

Among recent Indonesian features, *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, 2017), directed by Mouly Surya from a story idea by Garin Nugroho, offers a particularly rewarding object for such a reading. The film won ten Citra awards at the 2018 Indonesian Film Festival, among them Best Feature Film and Best Director, and was widely credited with bringing the gender injustice endured by women in rural Indonesia into mainstream visibility (Oktavianus, 2018). Its narrative follows Marlina, a widow living alone in the savannah hills of Sumba, who poisons and then beheads the leader of a band of robbers who has seized her livestock and raped her, and who afterwards walks the long road to the district police post carrying the severed head. The story is divided explicitly into four acts bearing the intertitles *Robbery*, *Journey*, *Confession*, and *Birth*, a segmentation that Gumulja and Prasetio (2020) read as integral to the way the film frames a female perspective across its plot. The film's rhythm is slow and contemplative, built on long takes and an unusually sparse score; access is confined to the experience of its female characters; and at no point is a narrator or voice-over employed to guide interpretation. These are properties of narrative organisation, not of theme, and they invite a structural reading.

Existing scholarship on the film has approached it through a consistent set of representational questions. Oktavianus (2018) reads it semiotically, identifying signs of gender injustice in the forms of subordination, marginalisation, violence, and the double burden of domestic labour. Gumulja and Prasetio (2020) apply multimodal analysis, examining how representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions combine to constitute a feminist image of womanhood. Sembiring (2022) treats the film as a study in the relation between power and resistance, cataloguing the forms of violence the female characters endure and the strategies by which they refuse them. Sumakud and Septyana (2020) add a reading through Sara Mills's critical discourse analysis, showing how the positions of subject, object, and reader within the film's discourse articulate women's struggle against patriarchal culture. Beyond the academic literature, Satya (2018) offers a critical reading that treats the film's violence as structured in three rather than four movements. Taken together, this body of work has established convincingly that the film represents gender-based violence and resistance to it.

A second line of scholarship, conducted largely on other objects, has established the analytical value of the narratological apparatus this article employs. Didipu (2018) demonstrates on Indonesian prose fiction that Genette's categories expose storytelling decisions that are habitually invisible yet decisive for meaning, while Zahro and Indrastuti (2024) show that the position of the narrating instance governs how a reader accepts and construes narrated events. In film studies proper, Bordwell (1985), Branigan (1992), and Verstraten (2009) have each adapted narratological vocabulary to the audiovisual medium, and Kozloff (1988) has shown that the absence of voice-over is itself a significant narrational choice rather than a neutral default. Within Indonesian cinema studies, Sen (1994), Hanan (2017), and Barker (2019) have traced how questions of gender and regional specificity are negotiated on screen, though largely at the level of representation and industry rather than discourse structure.

The gap that emerges from these two bodies of work is not an absence of publications but a deficiency in knowledge. The representational findings about this film rest on structural features that have never been described: no study has taken the organisation of its narrative discourse—order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice—as its primary object, and consequently no study can say whether the film's much-discussed refusal of objectification is an effect of its imagery, its editing, or its narrational architecture. The narratological literature, conversely, has applied Genette's categories to Indonesian prose and to Euro-American cinema, but not to an Indonesian film in which the withholding of narration is itself thematically charged. This article is the first to submit *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* to a complete Genettean analysis and to argue that its five narrative categories operate as a single, coherent argument about how the testimony of women who survive sexual violence ought to be received.

The study therefore pursues three aims. It describes the narrative structure of the film across Genette's five categories and establishes how those categories interlock in constituting the experience of viewing. It places the resulting structural findings in dialogue with Mulvey's (1975) critique of the gaze and with Caruth's (1996) account of traumatic memory, in order to show that formal choices carry ideological weight. And it asks what follows, for the study of Indonesian cinema, from treating narrative organisation as a bearer of social argument rather than as a container for one.

METHOD

The study is a qualitative textual analysis of a single film, conducted through close reading. The design was chosen because the research problem—how the organisation of narrative discourse works—is answerable only through sustained attention to the text itself, and not through data elicited from audiences or from the filmmakers. What follows sets out the theoretical framework and the point at which each component of it is brought to bear, the corpus and its cultural setting, the procedure of data collection, the steps taken to establish credibility, and the ethical position from which the reading is made.

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

Genette's (1980) narratology supplies the primary analytical framework. Genette distinguishes three strata within any narrative: *story*, the chronological order of events in the narrated world; *narrative*, the discourse as it is presented to a reader or spectator; and *narrating*, the act by which that discourse is produced. The interval between story and narrative is precisely where directorial decisions operate—which order is chosen, how long each event is granted, from where it is perceived, and who speaks. Genette elaborates five analytical categories across that interval: order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice. Genette (1988) subsequently refined several of these definitions, and the refinements are followed here where they bear on the analysis. The adaptation of the model to film follows Chatman (1978), Bordwell (1985), Branigan (1992), Bal (2017), and in particular Verstraten (2009), who argues that the audiovisual medium distributes narrational functions across image and sound rather than concentrating them in a verbal narrator.

Order

Order concerns the relation between the chronological succession of events in the story (*histoire*) and the succession in which they are presented in discourse (*récit*). Discrepancy between the two is *anachrony*, subdivided into *analepsis*, a movement back to earlier events, and *prolepsis*, an anticipation of later ones. Where the two orders coincide completely, Genette (1980) speaks of a *zero-degree narrative*.

Duration

Duration concerns the relation between the time an event occupies in the story and the time its narration occupies on screen. Genette (1980) formulates four principal values: *scene*, in which story time and discourse time run approximately together; *summary*, in which an extended story time is condensed into a shorter discourse time; *ellipsis*, in which story time passes with no discursive representation whatsoever; and *pause*, in which discourse time continues while story time is suspended.

Frequency

Frequency concerns the relation between the number of times an event occurs and the number of times it is narrated. Genette (1980) identifies the *singulative*, narrating once what occurred once; the *repetitive*, narrating several times what occurred once; and the *iterative*, narrating once what occurred habitually.

Mood and the Politics of the Gaze

Mood governs the regulation of narrative information, principally through *focalisation*, the concept by which Genette (1980) separates the question of who perceives from the question of who speaks. He distinguishes *zero focalisation*, in which the narrating instance knows and discloses more than any character; *internal focalisation*, in which narration is filtered through a single consciousness and the spectator's access is bounded by what that character knows, sees, and undergoes; and *external focalisation*, in which only observable action and speech are reported, with no access to any interiority. The choice determines how far a spectator is admitted into a character's subjective experience, and in a film concerned with violence against women that choice bears directly on the ideological position the spectator is invited to occupy. Genette's categories are accordingly read alongside Mulvey's (1975) critique of the gaze. Mulvey argues that classical narrative cinema organises the image of woman as spectacle for a desiring male look, both within the diegesis and in the auditorium, a configuration later widely discussed as the male gaze and extended by Smelik (1998) into an account of how feminist cinema might reorganise it. Where Genette supplies a formal instrument for establishing from where an event is perceived, Mulvey supplies the reason why that position is never gender-neutral, particularly in sequences involving women's bodies and sexual violence.

Voice and Traumatic Memory

Voice concerns who narrates and how that instance is situated with respect to the narrated world. Genette (1980) distinguishes narrators along two axes: the narrative level, separating *extradiegetic* from *intradiegetic* narrators, and the relation to the story, separating *heterodiegetic* from *homodiegetic* ones. Their combination yields four types with distinct consequences for distance and credibility. Kozloff (1988) shows that in cinema the absence of an audible narrator does not abolish the narrating instance but relocates it in framing, editing, and titling; Zahro and Indrastuti (2024) demonstrate on an Indonesian corpus that the position of that instance conditions how events are accepted. Alongside voice, the study borrows a single insight from trauma theory. Caruth (1996) argues that traumatic experience resists full presence at the moment of its occurrence, and therefore tends to resist direct and linear narration, surfacing instead through symptom, delay, and gap; Kaplan (2005) and Walker (2005) have carried the argument into screen media, showing that films about trauma frequently register it through formal disturbance rather than through explicit recounting. This insight is used here not to diagnose a character but to read why certain structural choices—notably the omission of scenes that would conventionally dwell on aftermath—are better understood as formal correlates of how trauma operates than as narrative oversights.

The three frameworks are layered rather than equally weighted. Genette (1980) functions as the principal apparatus, furnishing the vocabulary through which the discourse is mapped; Mulvey (1975) and Caruth (1996) are applied selectively at the point of discussion, precisely

where a structural finding requires an account of its ideological or affective consequence. The combination is necessary because structural narratology is descriptive and carries no inherent critique of gender, while the critique of the gaze and the theory of trauma were not devised to map discourse in detail. Setting them side by side allows the study to show that the formal question of how a narrative is built and the ideological question of why that construction matters for the representation of gender are, in this object, inseparable.

Corpus, Setting, and Period of Analysis

The corpus consists of a single work analysed in its entirety: *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak*, directed by Mouly Surya, released in 2017, with a screenplay by Surya and Rama Adi from a story idea by Garin Nugroho, produced by Cinesurya Pictures in collaboration with Kaninga Pictures, and running ninety-three minutes. The principal performers are Marsha Timothy as Marlina, Dea Panendra as Novi, and Egi Fedly as Markus. The theatrical release version was used throughout; no alternative cut was consulted. Analysis was conducted between February and May 2025.

The Sumbanese setting supplies an indispensable context for a narratological reading, particularly for the way the film handles the past and the dead. Sumbanese communities traditionally observe *Marapu*, an indigenous religious system in which ancestors mediate between the living and the unseen, so that corpses and mortuary ritual carry high social and spiritual value and entail considerable customary expense (Soeriadiredja, 2013). Ethnographies of the region have shown more broadly that objects and material arrangements carry biographical and social meaning that is rarely spoken aloud (Hoskins, 1998; Keane, 1997). Within that frame, the unburied body of Marlina's husband, preserved in the front room throughout the film, is not set dressing but an index of her socio-economic and spiritual position: vulnerable, and cut off from the completion of communal rite. Its presence as a mute material object, rather than as an episode recounted in flashback, is consistent with a cultural logic in which ancestors are honoured through act and rite rather than through speech.

Two further properties of the work bear directly on the analysis. The four-act structure is marked explicitly by intertitles and establishes an overt temporal segmentation. Most of the running time is occupied by a journey conducted at a deliberate pace with minimal dialogue, the spectator is granted no access to Marlina's life before the night of the robbery, and no verbal narrator of any kind is employed. Gender relations within the depicted society constitute a third contextual condition: Marlina lives without male protection in the household, a position that in many patriarchal rural settings produces a double vulnerability, economic and physical. Sumakud and Septyana (2020) note that the story departs from a social phenomenon reported in parts of Sumba, the seizure of women as a means of compelling marriage, which situates the violence depicted within a real structural problem rather than a purely dramatic invention.

Data Collection

Data were generated through three successive stages of viewing. The first was an uninterrupted screening of the complete film, undertaken to establish an overall picture of its narrative architecture: the division into acts, the succession of events, and the dominant patterns of framing and cutting. The second was a segmented screening, act by act, in which each scene was logged against five observation columns corresponding to Genette's categories: the chronological position of the event, the relation between story time and discourse time, the pattern of the event's occurrence in discourse, the focalisation in operation, and the distribution of information to the spectator. Every entry was recorded on an observation sheet with the timecode of the relevant shot, so that each claim in the analysis remains traceable to a locatable passage of the film. The third stage was a targeted re-screening of sequences

requiring verification, in particular transitions between scenes and passages with the potential to contain anachrony or a shift of focalisation, undertaken to secure consistency of reading.

Data Validation and Analysis

Analysis proceeded through the five categories in sequence: order, then duration, then frequency, then mood, then voice. For each category the relevant events were first mapped exhaustively; the resulting map was then compared against the conceptual definition of the category, and the comparison was written up as a finding supported by specified shots. Because Genette (1980) conceives the five categories as an interlocking system rather than as independent variables, each category's findings were subsequently cross-read against the others to ensure that a reading advanced under one heading did not contradict a reading advanced under another. The consolidated structural findings were then contextualised in relation to the social question the film raises, with Mulvey (1975) brought to bear on the ideological implications of focalisation and Caruth (1996) on the implications of the choices governing duration and order.

Three procedures were adopted to establish the trustworthiness of the reading. The first was theoretical triangulation: checking whether the reading of a given sequence remained stable when approached from more than one of Genette's categories—verifying, for example, that a passage read as ellipsis under duration did not conflict with its reading under order or voice. The second was reflexive re-reading: returning to the observation sheets after a deliberate interval in order to test whether the analyst's interpretation of the same sequence had remained consistent. The third was comparison with prior scholarship: examining whether the structural findings converged with or diverged from the representational findings of Oktavianus (2018), Gumulja and Prasetio (2020), Sembiring (2022), and Sumakud and Septyana (2020), as a cross-check on a shared object. These steps do not remove the interpretive character of textual analysis; they ensure that the interpretation offered is defensible and can be traced back to the textual evidence.

Research Ethics and Positionality

The study involved no human participants and required no institutional ethical approval. Its materials are a commercially released feature film and published scholarship. Film stills are reproduced within the limits of fair dealing for criticism and review, each attributed to creator, title, year, and rights holder, and none is reproduced at a resolution or extent that could substitute for the work. The analyst writes as an Indonesian graduate student in the arts and humanities, with no personal or professional connection to the production, and with no descent from or residence in the Sumbanese communities whose belief system provides the film's setting; the account of *Marapu* offered here is drawn from published ethnography rather than from field knowledge, and is used only so far as it bears on the reading of narrative form. Because the film depicts sexual violence, the analysis describes the relevant sequences no more concretely than the argument requires.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Order: Linearity as a Refusal of the Demand for Proof

The film segments its story explicitly through four intertitles—*Robbery*, *Journey*, *Confession*, and *Birth*—as shown in Figure 1. These titles cut the plot into declared stages; they do not narrate, and they fill no gap in the story. Chronologically, the sequence begins with the robbery and the poisoning of Markus's band on the night of the first day, marked by an evening meal that ends with the intruders slumped on the floor while Marlina sits among them in silence, as shown in Figure 2.

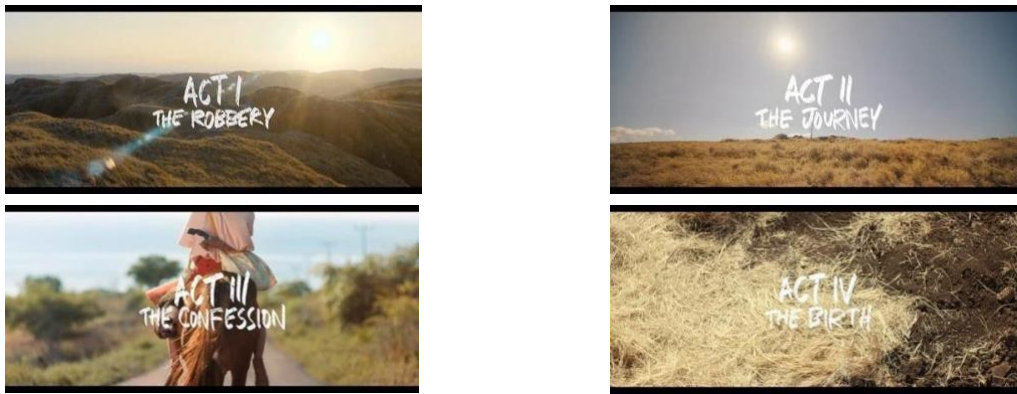


Figure 1. The four intertitles that segment the film: *Robbery*, *Journey*, *Confession*, and *Birth*. Film stills from *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (Surya, 2017). Cinesurya Pictures and Kaninga Pictures. Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review.



Figure 2. The close of *Robbery*: Marlina sits among the poisoned intruders in her own front room. Film still from *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (Surya, 2017). Cinesurya Pictures and Kaninga Pictures. Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review.

Marlina's journey towards the police post begins the following morning, and on the road she encounters Novi. Her report at the police station follows from midday into the evening of the same day. The act titled *Birth*, which encompasses her return home, Novi's killing of Franz, and the delivery of Novi's child, occupies that night and the small hours that follow, closing on an image of a newborn in Marlina's arms beneath a brightening sky. Set against the order of the story, no act retells or returns to an earlier event, and each is linked chronologically and causally to the next. The film is, in Genette's (1980) terms, a zero-degree narrative.

The absence of anachrony acquires its significance from the elements that conventionally invite it and are nonetheless left unnarrated. The death of Marlina's husband, an event that logically precedes the entire plot, is never visualised as a flashback. His preserved body sits in the corner of the room, wrapped in Sumbanese woven cloth and arranged in a posture recalling the foetus in the womb according to *Marapu* practice. The image appears in the opening minutes without verbal gloss, and the spectator is left to construe it. No scene establishes when or how he died, or what Marlina's life with him had been. The choice is consistent with the film's wider logic: the past is present as material fact, not as recounted episode—a logic that the ethnography of the region would recognise, since objects there routinely carry biographies that are never spoken (Hoskins, 1998).

The same pattern governs Marlina's psychological state after the killing. Analepsis is not recruited to explore the trauma of that night. Instead the film presents the headless figure of Markus, who appears in several later shots playing the *jungga* and is seen by Marlina alone, while those around her register nothing. The apparition does not disturb the chronology: the

Markus who appears is neither a flashback to the night of the killing nor a depiction of events elsewhere. What Marlina sees is a disturbance operating in the present tense. Read through Caruth's (1996) account of traumatic memory, this recurrent figure can be understood as the formal correlate of what trauma theory describes as the return of an experience that cannot be integrated into linear narrative: not a flashback that explains an origin, but a presence that troubles the present without ever being told as a story. The film, in other words, does not narrate Marlina's trauma; it permits it to appear as a symptom running alongside the unfolding action, a formal solution that corresponds closely to Caruth's argument that traumatic experience resists being rendered as sequential account, and to Walker's (2005) observation that screen narratives of trauma often register it through disturbance of form rather than through recounting.

The intertitles *Confession* and *Birth* raise expectations about the direction of the plot, but they cannot be classed as prolepsis in Genette's (1980) sense. Each appears immediately before the act it names, functioning as a boundary marker that organises the plot and signals a transition between stages without disclosing the content of what follows. The narrating instance names the segments; it does not anticipate their events.

The analysis of order therefore establishes a linear structure with explicit segmentation across four acts and without anachrony. This finding acquires its force in the social context the film invokes. Women who report sexual violence in Indonesia are routinely required to account for their past, their circumstances, their marital history, and their conduct before the assault, as a precondition for their testimony being credited. A linear narrative without analepsis refuses that requirement structurally. There is no past to be verified and no antecedent context that must be supplied before Marlina's actions can be understood. By withholding the flashbacks that might have served as justification, the film asserts that her experience on that night stands on its own. The choice insists that her pursuit of redress is to be undergone sequentially, without pauses for retrospective explanation that might soften either her acts or her suffering. This qualifies, rather than contradicts, the representational reading offered by Sembiring (2022): what that study identifies as an assertion of resistance at the level of character is here shown to be secured at the level of narrative order.

Duration: Tempo as the Management of the Victim's Experience

The act titled *Robbery* is constructed from a series of long takes and dialogue with no temporal ellipsis, as shown in Figure 3. The camera holds Marlina and Markus in the same room while he plays the *jungga* and demands food, until the intruders begin to lose consciousness after eating poisoned chicken soup. The spectator watches the situation change in something close to real time; there is no cut that skips a stage and no acceleration through aggressive editing. This is *scene* in Genette's (1980) sense, discourse time approximating diegetic time. It is also the only passage in the film in which the balance of power between Marlina and her assailants actively shifts, from her helplessness to the moment at which the poison takes effect and control slowly migrates. Presenting that shift in a sustained take places the spectator on the same footing as Marlina, waiting with her and enduring the same interval before the change arrives.



Figure 3. A sustained take in *Robbery* holds the action within the single room of Marlina's house. Film still from *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (Surya, 2017). Cinesurya Pictures and Kaininga Pictures. Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review.

Her journey towards the police post, undertaken first with Novi aboard a truck and then alone on horseback after the truck is commandeered by Franz, is rendered as *summary*: an extended story time compressed into a few minutes of screen time. What the film preserves is consistent—Marlina still carrying the head, her meeting with Novi, her passage in the truck, her solitary progress on foot and on horseback. The compression is not applied indiscriminately. What is removed is time that does not alter the conflict; what is retained is time in which Marlina is active with respect to an act already committed and an aim not yet achieved. Summary here amounts to a judgement about what in this journey carries meaning. The transition from the close of *Robbery*, with Marlina having just beheaded Markus at night, to the opening of *Journey* the following morning presents nothing of the interval between. There is no scene of her cleaning herself, preparing, wrapping the head, or sitting stunned after the killing. This is *ellipsis*: story time elapsing without discursive representation. Its function exceeds economy. The ellipsis removes the space conventionally granted to a character after an act of violence, and with it the possibility of watching Marlina regret what she has done. The narrative presents the outcome of the decision without the emotional process that produced it; she has already set out in accordance with a decision completed before the spectator is given any occasion to interrogate it. As argued under order, the decision to elide the moment after violence rather than to stage it accords with Caruth's (1996) understanding of trauma as registered most acutely in interruption and absence rather than in explicit narration. The ellipsis at this juncture is not narrative forgetfulness but a formal rendering of what verbal language struggles to state directly.

At several transitions the camera turns to the savannah itself—dry hills, a wide horizon, empty ground—framed without any character or action, as in Figure 4. *Pause* in Genette's (1980) sense is rare in cinema, since the audiovisual medium tends to present movement even in the absence of character action. A landscape shot containing no figure nonetheless satisfies the definition: story time is effectively suspended while discourse time continues in order to render atmosphere. The pause arrests the development of the conflict and redirects attention from what characters do to the space in which they do it. The landscape thereby ceases to be backdrop: it becomes the element that isolates Marlina and that measures, in distance, her remoteness from protection and redress.



Figure 4. A shot of the Sumba savannah, empty of figures, at a transition between scenes.
 Film still from *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (Surya, 2017). Cinesurya Pictures and Kaninga Pictures.
 Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review.

The four values of duration disclose a consistent pattern. The film expands time precisely where power relations are in flux, compresses time in which movement through space does not alter the conflict, and excises time in which no change of state is to be witnessed. Duration does not track the length of the story; it tracks the bearing of each moment on the development of Marlina's predicament. The prevalence of long takes yields a comparatively slow tempo, but that tempo is an instrument of endurance rather than of contemplation: it obliges the spectator to remain with the situation for as long as Marlina must. This finding extends Gumulja and Prasetyo's (2020) multimodal account, which identifies a female perspective in the film's compositional choices without addressing the temporal organisation through which that perspective is sustained.

Frequency: Singulative Narration and the Weight of a Single Event

The poisoning of Markus's band, the beheading of Markus, Marlina's report at the police post, and Novi's killing of Franz as she goes into labour each occur once and are narrated once. None is retold from a second vantage or reaffirmed through the repetition of a shot. This is singulative narration in its strictest form, a one-to-one relation between occurrence and narration. What follows from the choice is a particular distribution of weight. Because no act of Marlina's is emphasised through narrative repetition, the spectator is not directed to read one event as more consequential than another. The poisoning, the beheading, and the report arrive with equal narrative weight, each shown once, performed once, never returned to for confirmation. The meaning of each event rests on the event itself rather than on its recurrence in discourse.

Throughout the act titled *Journey*, the headless figure of Markus appears repeatedly behind Marlina. The film does not, however, retell the beheading: that event occurred and was narrated once, in *Robbery*. What recurs afterwards is the presence of Markus as a figure, not a renarration of his death. The distinction matters, because it marks how the film handles the consequences of violence. It declines to repeat the killing in order to signify trauma. The pattern inverts a widespread convention of screen narratives of trauma, which rely on visual repetition—flashbacks recurring at intervals, sequences replayed from altered angles, memory montages—to indicate an experience that continues to return. Kaplan (2005) and Walker (2005) have both noted how readily that convention converts suffering into spectacle. This film takes the opposite route: repetition is withheld so that the event remains singular and complete, while its weight is displaced onto a symbolic presence that follows without ever returning to recount its own origin.

Nor is Marlina's routine before the robbery rendered iteratively. It is implied by the condition of the house and by a few lines of dialogue, and is never given a scene of its own. The absence

is legible as a choice: by declining to present her prior life as habitual and patterned, the film refuses to frame it as ordinary. The spectator is admitted instead into a single night that cannot be repeated, as though the life preceding it existed only as the ground of an event that will alter it permanently.

Singulative narration here is not an artefact of limited running time but the consequence of a consistent narrational stance. Each event is granted one occurrence and one narration. Repetition is withheld because it would return to a matter already closed and would frame Marlina's suffering as an object of renewed attention. The pattern converges with those established under order and duration: the film continues forward, declines to repeat, declines to generalise, so that each of Marlina's acts stands as an event that cannot be exchanged for another, cannot be subsumed under a type, and cannot be undergone twice. The consequence is ethical as much as formal. By maintaining a singulative frequency across all four acts, the film ensures that its scenes of violence, the robbery and the rape alike, are presented once and never re-presented for dramatic emphasis, and so avoids the conversion of a character's suffering into repeated visual consumption.

Mood: Focalisation as a Mechanism of Empathy and a Politics of the Gaze

Across *Journey*, the headless figure of Markus walks behind Marlina playing a Sumbanese stringed instrument, as shown in Figure 5. He is framed alongside other figures even though no one around him reacts to his presence. This is internal focalisation of a firm and sustained kind: the narrative does not merely follow what Marlina thinks but admits her perceptions, hallucinatory ones included, into the frame with the standing of objective fact. Elsewhere a movement of her eyes alone is sufficient to direct the spectator to what she sees, so that access to her perception is continuous rather than episodic. Branigan (1992) describes this as the conferral of epistemic authority on a character's perception, and its effect here is to make Marlina's account of her own experience unnecessary: what she perceives is simply shown.



Figure 5. Internal focalisation on Marlina: the headless figure of Markus enters the frame with the standing of objective fact.

Film still from *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (Surya, 2017). Cinesurya Pictures and Kaininga Pictures. Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review.

In *Birth*, when Novi is confined to the kitchen at Franz's order, the spectator is not shown the assault taking place in the adjoining room, but only Novi's face, her held breath, and the onset of her contractions, while what happens elsewhere is heard at a remove, as in Figures 6 and 7. The centre of focalisation shifts from Marlina to Novi. The principle of restriction to a single consciousness is preserved; only the consciousness changes, in accordance with the dramatic requirement of the scene. Placing Novi at the centre at that moment moves the emotional position from the direct victim to a witness who hears and cannot intervene, sharpening a distinct anger and preparing, narratively, the motivation for her killing of Franz shortly afterwards. The shift is not a variation of viewpoint for its own sake but a means of distributing

the burden of women's suffering across more than one character, so that violence is at once undergone and witnessed, and witnessing becomes a ground for action.



Figure 6. Novi held at the centre of focalisation, lit and framed as the one who perceives.

Film still from *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (Surya, 2017). Cinesurya Pictures and Kaninga Pictures.
Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review.



Figure 7. Novi at the hearth during *Birth*: the spectator is given her face and her held breath in place of the assault in the adjoining room.

Film still from *Marlina si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (Surya, 2017). Cinesurya Pictures and Kaninga Pictures.
Reproduced for the purposes of criticism and review.

The decision not to show the assault directly, and to substitute for it the face of a woman listening, is productively read through Mulvey's (1975) critique. Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema tends to present the female body as a visual object furnishing pleasure, a tendency that becomes acutely problematic in scenes of sexual violence, where the victim's body risks conversion into spectacle. By withholding Marlina's body at the moment of violence and shifting instead to Novi's held breath, the film declines to offer sexual violence as a visual event for consumption. Focalisation operates here as an ethical as well as an aesthetic mechanism: it withholds a potentially objectifying look and substitutes one that positions the spectator as bearing witness rather than as consuming. This is the structural counterpart of what Smelik (1998) describes as feminist cinema's reorganisation of the look, and it specifies, at the level of discourse, the refusal that Sumakud and Septyana (2020) locate at the level of subject position.

While Marlina and Novi travel by truck towards the police post, the narrative detaches from them to show Franz and his companion driving the stolen cattle homeward, information unavailable to Marlina at that moment. This is zero focalisation, in which the narrating instance discloses more than the focal character knows. Genette (1980) characterises the position as one that looks from behind the character, in a direction her own consciousness cannot reach. By disclosing what Marlina does not yet know, the narrative widens the

spectator's field beyond the limits of her awareness, and it is precisely this widening that generates dramatic tension, since the restriction otherwise maintained is deliberately released. The disclosure also carries an argument: the dangers that threaten women frequently lie outside their knowledge and beyond their control, however vigilant they may be.

In a number of distant shots, figures move across the savannah at scale. Long framing does not by itself indicate external focalisation, since a long shot that follows Marlina's movement and remains within her perceptual orientation still counts as internally focalised. Camera distance is a question of cinematography; focalisation is a question of access to knowledge. The passages legible as externally focalised are those in which the narrative simultaneously withholds all access to any character's perception or inner state. It is that withholding, and not the remoteness of the camera, that makes them external. The distinction is one that Verstraten (2009) argues film analysis frequently collapses, and observing it here prevents the misreading of a stylistic preference as a narrational one.

Read together, these four patterns show that mood functions in this film as an instrument adjusted to the thematic requirement of each scene. Sustained internal focalisation on Marlina installs the spectator within her psychological burden; the migration of internal focalisation to Novi distributes both suffering and the warrant for action across two women; zero focalisation releases the restriction in order to assert a vulnerability beyond the protagonist's control; and external focalisation withdraws inner access entirely in order to give the landscape standing as a narrative force. Unlike frequency, which exhibits the dominance of a single value, mood operates through deliberate variation, and it is that variation which allows the film to negotiate, scene by scene, how far the spectator may enter Marlina's mind and at what point she must be observed from a distance—without her ever becoming the object of a look that exploits her suffering.

Voice: The Absent Narrator and the Autonomy of the Victim's Story

The film employs no voice-over at any point. No character, Marlina included, recounts events to the spectator through spoken narration. Events are presented directly through image and through dialogue between characters, with no supervening layer of explanatory speech. In the absence of any audible narrator, the presentation of events approximates the position of a heterodiegetic narrating instance, since no character within the story performs the function of narrating it. The approximation is precisely that: as Kozloff (1988) argues, a film without voice-over does not thereby lack a narrating instance, but relocates it into framing, cutting, and titling, where it can be identified by its effects rather than heard as a voice.

The consequence for Marlina is exact. She who undergoes the entire action is never granted the opportunity to tell her story verbally—not through interior monologue, not through correspondence, not through retrospective address—which means that the spectator is never given access to how she construes what she has done. Action unfolds before the spectator without any interpretive layer supplied by the character who undergoes it.

The four intertitles that mark the turn of each act—*Robbery*, *Journey*, *Confession*, *Birth*—register an agency operating outside the diegetic world the characters inhabit. The words are spoken by no one in the story; they appear as text interrupting the screen, naming and bounding segments that the characters themselves have no reason to recognise as separate chapters. This is the extradiegetic level: an instance that organises the narrated world without descending into it as character or as explanatory voice. Its presence confers structure without conferring speech, while giving the spectator the film's own division of its action.

Because no narrator recounts the events from a determinate later moment, the presentation produces an impression of simultaneity between occurrence and transmission. There is no framing device, no opening or closing passage showing an older Marlina in recollection, and no marker of any kind indicating that the whole has been retold from a future vantage under

altered conditions. The absence has a precise consequence for the spectator's position: nothing guarantees that Marlina will survive or that her suffering will be concluded, because no voice speaks from a point at which the outcome is already known.

Her report at the police post constitutes the film's one opening onto a metadiegetic level, an opportunity for a character to become the homodiegetic narrator of her own story through flashbacks visualised alongside her testimony, and so to produce a second narrative within the first. The film declines it. The report is staged as a scene of live dialogue on the same diegetic level as everything else, unaccompanied by any visualisation of what she describes. Even at the moment of speaking to others, Marlina is not made the narrator of her own story.

These four observations converge: the narrating instance in this film remains consistently close to a heterodiegetic and extradiegetic position, generates an impression of simultaneity between event and presentation, and leaves no opening for a metadiegetic level. Voice exhibits, in other words, a stability that the other categories do not; at no point does the presenting agency become personal, retrospective, or layered.

This absence carries implications that require reading against the social setting the film invokes. Women who have survived sexual violence, in rural Indonesia as elsewhere, are routinely required to speak repeatedly, to recount events again, and to persuade others of the truth of what they have undergone, a demand that many describe as a repetition of the violence in another register. By withholding from Marlina the position of homodiegetic narrator, even at the moment of her report, the film refuses structurally to make verbal testimony the condition of her experience's legitimacy. Authority over the story resides wholly in the acts, images, and consequences presented, not in an oral account whose truthfulness must be established. This choice at the level of voice aligns exactly with the choice at the level of order examined earlier: both decline to make proof a precondition of validity.

Narrative Structure as an Argument about Gender-Based Violence

Read together, the five categories disclose a narrative logic consistent across every layer of the discourse. Under order, the film sustains a linearity almost undisturbed by anachrony. Under duration, it holds time open exactly where power relations shift, compresses time in which movement does not alter the conflict, and excises the time after violence. Under frequency, singulative narration establishes each of Marlina's acts as a single event that is neither generalised nor replayed. Under mood, a deliberate migration of focalisation calibrates how far the spectator may enter a character's mind without the victim's body becoming an object of the look. Under voice, the absence of any verbal narrator holds the presenting agency in a consistently heterodiegetic and extradiegetic position. Five categories, five distinct formal operations, one argument.

Set against prior scholarship, these findings complement rather than contradict. Oktavianus (2018), Gumulja and Prasetyo (2020), Sembiring (2022), and Sumakud and Septyana (2020) each demonstrate that the film represents gender injustice, female resistance, and a refusal of patriarchal custom, through symbol, visual composition, relations of power, and subject position within discourse respectively. The present study shows that those representations do not stand unsupported: they rest on a structure of narrative discourse that consistently refuses to accommodate proof, repetition, or verbal testimony of the victim's experience. What earlier studies read as a represented resistance to patriarchy is here shown to be constituted through the choice of narrative form, and not through the content of the story alone. The point of divergence is worth stating plainly: where Sembiring (2022) locates resistance in what Marlina does, this analysis locates it additionally in what the film declines to narrate. The two findings are compatible, but only the second explains why the film does not read as an exploitation narrative despite depicting the same events that such narratives depict.

Mulvey's (1975) critique explains why the film's handling of focalisation is not merely a technical preference. By withholding a focalisation that would make Marlina's body an object of the look at the moment of sexual violence, and shifting instead to Novi as a listening witness, the film structurally declines the configuration Mulvey identifies, in which women's suffering is converted into spectacle for visual pleasure. Caruth's (1996) insight, in turn, explains why the withholding of analepsis and the ellipsis after violence are not omissions but formal correspondences to the operation of trauma, which makes itself felt through interruption and absence rather than through explicit linear account. Neither framework could have produced these findings on its own; each becomes available only once the structure has been described.

The wider argument follows from the convergence. The spectator is given no repeated explanation of how the violence came about, and no demonstration that Marlina's acts follow from it; the connection is left to be drawn. The structure can therefore be read as a narrative critique of a social tendency to require that victims of violence explain, prove, and account for their experience continually, while the structural conditions producing that violence are seldom interrogated. The Sumbanese setting reinforces the logic rather than merely housing it: in a belief system that honours the body and the ancestors through act and rite rather than through speech (Soeriadiredja, 2013), and in a material culture where objects carry biographies that are never verbalised (Hoskins, 1998), the film's placement of body, object, and space as bearers of meaning more trustworthy than verbal explanation is culturally motivated. That logic is then extended to Marlina's own experience. The film's choice of narrative form thereby takes a position on how a society ought to receive the testimony of women who survive violence: without requiring them to prove it.

CONCLUSION

The narrative discourse of *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* is organised, across all five of Genette's categories, as a single refusal of the demand for proof. Order remains linear and withholds analepsis exactly where the death of Marlina's husband and the aftermath of her own violence would conventionally have invited it. Duration expands where power relations shift, compresses movement that does not alter the conflict, and excises the interval in which remorse might have been staged. Frequency remains singulative, so that each act stands as an event that cannot be generalised into a habit or replayed for emphasis. Mood migrates deliberately between internal, zero, and external focalisation, regulating the spectator's proximity without ever converting the victim's body into spectacle. Voice holds the narrating instance in a consistently heterodiegetic and extradiegetic position, denying Marlina verbal authority over her own story even at the moment of her report to the police. These are not five separate findings but five formal expressions of one position.

The contribution is twofold. For narratology, the study demonstrates that Genette's categories retain their analytical purchase on contemporary audiovisual work, including work that dispenses with a verbal narrator altogether, provided they are applied consistently across all five categories and are not detached from the socio-cultural setting of the object. For the study of Indonesian cinema, it offers a methodological proposition: that the reading of represented social themes such as gender-based violence becomes substantially more complete when set beside a reading of the discourse structure that conveys them, since the two operate, as this film shows, as a single argument rather than as two independent layers. For practitioners and for those who programme and teach such work, the finding is more specific still: the avoidance of exploitation in the depiction of sexual violence is achievable through decisions about order, duration, frequency, focalisation, and narrating instance, and not only through decisions about what is framed.

The study is limited by its corpus. It analyses a single film, so its findings do not extend of themselves to other works on comparable themes, and its account of the Sumbanese setting is

drawn from published ethnography rather than from fieldwork, which constrains what can be claimed about the cultural motivation of particular formal choices. The layering of Mulvey and Caruth as interpretive lenses, applied selectively at the point of discussion, is likewise a compromise rather than a fully articulated synthesis.

Three lines of further research follow. A comparative application of the same framework to other Indonesian features treating gender-based violence would establish whether the refusal of analepsis, repetition, and verbal narration is particular to this film or indicative of a wider tendency in contemporary Indonesian cinema. A study combining structural analysis with reception research among Indonesian audiences would test whether the spectatorial position described here is in fact the position audiences occupy. And a sustained theoretical project might integrate narratology, feminist analysis of the gaze, and trauma theory more systematically than the layered arrangement adopted here, so that the ideological reading is generated from within the formal description rather than applied to it.

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Ethical approval and informed consent. Not applicable. The study involved no human participants and required no ethical approval. Film stills are reproduced within the limits of fair dealing for criticism and review, with attribution to creator, title, year, and rights holder.

Data availability. The film analysed is commercially available. The observation sheets recording the timecoded analysis of all five narrative categories are held by the author and may be consulted on reasonable request.

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