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Masculinity Under the Mask: An Experimental Film on Gender in Topèng Dhâlâng Sumenep

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ABSTRACT

Topèng Dhâlâng is a Madurese masked dance-drama, still living in Sumenep Regency, in which every role, including all female characters, is performed by men while the dalang alone voices the dialogue. Existing scholarship on the form has concentrated on documentation, iconography and function, and has left the gendered labour of the performing body largely unexamined. This article reports a practice-as-research project that translated that phenomenon into TOPONG, an experimental film. The study asks how Madurese male bodies produce a convincing femininity onstage within a culture widely identified with an assertive ideal of manhood, and how that lived experience can be rendered as cinema rather than merely documented as spectacle. Fieldwork was carried out in Dusun Semaan, Dasuk District, Sumenep, through visual ethnography: participant observation of rehearsals, backstage preparation and performances, in-depth interviews with the dalang, dancers, musicians and mask keeper, audiovisual recording, and a reflexive journal. The material was interpreted through Judith Butler's account of gender as performative, and was then translated through a seven-stage creation model running from visual ethnography to artistic reflection. The study finds that the femininity of Topèng Dhâlâng is not disguise but a learned corporeal competence transmitted through repetition, one that coexists with rather than replaces the performers' masculinity; that the mask operates as a threshold rather than a covering, altering how the body senses as well as how it is seen; and that the acts of putting on and removing the mask carry as much meaning as the staged performance. TOPONG demonstrates that experimental film grounded in ethnographic experience produces knowledge about tradition that descriptive documentation cannot reach.

KEYWORDS

corporeal competence
cross-gender performance
Madura
practice as research
visual ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

The night was already deep when the sound of *gamelan*, *kendhang* (the double-headed drum that leads the ensemble) and Madurese *tembang* (sung poetry) filled the performance space in a villager's house in Dusun Semaan, Dasuk District, Sumenep Regency. Behind the stage, several men were busy putting on their costumes, occasionally exchanging jokes in Madurese. In one corner, two wooden chests of masks stood open. The masks were taken out one by one, wiped clean, and laid ready for use. Nothing about the men seemed out of the ordinary. They talked, laughed and moved as Madurese men generally do. A short while later, however, those same bodies had become the figures of the *wayang* repertoire on stage. Before the audience they were no longer merely players; they were bodies through which another order of life was made present by way of the mask.

That encounter became the point of departure for the creation of the film TOPONG. The interest that generated this project did not begin with a wish to document a traditional art form. It began with curiosity about the change that takes place when a male body enters the space of performance. The change felt sharpest whenever a female character appeared on stage. In Topèng Dhâlâng every female role is played by a man, and yet the movement, the facial orientation and the quality of presence that these performers construct produce a femininity that is entirely convincing. It is at this point that the question emerged which came to underpin both the research and the creative work: how do Madurese male bodies make femininity present through masked performance, when in daily life those same bodies inhabit a culture strongly identified with an assertive ideal of manhood?

Topèng Dhâlâng is one of the traditional performing arts still living in Sumenep Regency, Madura. It combines theatre, dance, music, puppetry narration, oral literature and the art of the mask into a single performance event, and its distinguishing feature is that only the *dalang* (the narrator-puppeteer who speaks for every character) delivers the dialogue while the masked performers carry the action with their bodies (Rahayu et al., 2021). It continues to be staged at weddings and at *rokat* rituals, the ceremonies by which a child considered vulnerable to misfortune is cleansed, so that its existence functions not only as entertainment but as part of a cultural practice that maintains collective memory, social values and the community's relationship with an inheritance transmitted across generations. Bouvier (2002), in the most comprehensive survey of Madurese musical and performance life available, situates the form within a dense ecology of village celebration in which performance is inseparable from ritual obligation, hospitality and social standing.

The interest in a male body producing femininity grew stronger once the experience of the performance was placed within the wider context of Madurese social life. Madurese society is commonly understood through a powerful image of masculinity bound up with courage, honour, religiosity and the position of men in the social order. The literature on *carok* (the ritualised duel by which an insult to a man's name is answered) has done much to consolidate that image, reading honour-based violence as an expression of a masculine ideal that is culturally legitimated and socially reproduced (Wiyata, 2002; Rifai, 2007). Read through Connell's framework, this is recognisably a configuration of hegemonic masculinity, in which one culturally exalted model of manhood organises the field of gender relations and subordinates other possible models (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within such a cultural setting, the presence of men playing female characters raises a question much broader than the technical matter of casting. The performance opens a space in which the body appears not as a fixed identity but as something capable of moving, changing and making other possibilities present through cultural practice.

Attention then extended beyond the bodies of the performers to the masks they wear. In Topèng Dhâlâng the mask is not a face covering or an accessory of costume but a medium of transformation that alters the way the body moves, looks, feels and builds its relationship with the performance space. Alongside this, the Madurese language, present in dialogue, *tembang*

and the *dalang*'s narration, forms a distinctive aesthetic experience. Language does not merely convey the story; it brings rhythm, emotion and cultural memory that fuse with the movement of the performers. Body, mask and language operate as three elements that continually animate one another.

Existing scholarship on Topèng Dhâlâng has concentrated on documentation and on questions of form, history and function. Studies have described the choreographic vocabulary and its reconstruction, traced the historical development of particular troupes, catalogued the iconography and colour symbolism of the masks, and analysed the offering dance as a commodity within the creative economy (Rahayu et al., 2021). This body of work is valuable and necessary, but it treats the performance chiefly as an object to be recorded, classified and preserved. The performing body itself, and in particular the gendered labour that body performs, has remained largely outside its frame.

Cross-gender performance in Java and Bali, by contrast, has attracted sustained attention. Sunardi (2009, 2015) has shown how East Javanese cross-gender dancers negotiate competing ideas of maleness and femaleness, official ideologies and lived social realities, through the very act of dancing. Ross and Nini Thowok (2005) document how a leading Indonesian cross-gender performer articulates gender fluidity as an aesthetic and philosophical position rather than a transgression. Peacock (1987), in his classic account of ludruk, read the transvestite performer as a symbolic figure through which a society dramatised its own modernisation, while Hughes-Freeland (2008) demonstrated how Javanese dance traditions embody and rework social change. Foley (2017) has drawn attention to the persistent asymmetries of gendered opportunity within Indonesian performance more broadly. Emigh (1996), writing across Balinese, Indian and Melanesian traditions, provides the most sustained theorisation of masked performance as a play between self and other, in which the mask is a meeting place rather than a concealment.

A parallel literature has addressed the relationship between ethnography and the moving image. Russell (1999) argues that experimental film and ethnographic film, long treated as separate practices, become mutually renewing when read together. MacDougall (2006) insists that images generate a form of corporeal knowledge that words cannot substitute for. Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009) reconsider observational cinema as a mode of inquiry rather than a neutral recording technique, and Pink (2021) sets out visual ethnography as a reflexive, multisensory practice in which the researcher's own experience is part of the material. Nichols (2017) provides the taxonomy of documentary modes against which a poetic or reflexive strategy can be positioned.

Placing these bodies of work alongside one another exposes a clear gap. Studies of Topèng Dhâlâng do not address gender as a corporeal practice. Studies of Indonesian cross-gender performance concentrate on Java and Bali and rarely reach Madura, whose cultural construction of masculinity is markedly different from the Javanese court-derived ideal of refinement. Studies in visual and experimental ethnography have seldom been mobilised in relation to Indonesian masked theatre, and Indonesian film practice concerned with traditional performance remains dominated by a documentary and preservationist framing that reproduces performance as spectacle. The gap is therefore not an absence of publications on Topèng Dhâlâng but a deficiency in knowledge about the body that performs it: how a male body in a culture of honour acquires, holds and relinquishes a feminine bodily vocabulary, and what that acquisition implies for the theory of gender as performance.

This article is the first to examine the negotiation of masculinity in Topèng Dhâlâng Sumenep through the making of an experimental film treated as a method of inquiry in its own right rather than as a means of presenting results obtained elsewhere. Accordingly, it has three aims. First, it sets out to describe how femininity is produced by male bodies in Topèng Dhâlâng, and to determine whether that production is best understood as impersonation, substitution

or negotiation. Second, it seeks to explain the function of the mask, the Madurese language and the cultural space of the performance in that process. Third, it aims to formulate and test a model for creating an experimental film that grows out of visual ethnography, and to assess what such a model can contribute to the study of local performing arts.

METHOD

Research Design and Approach

This study was designed as practice as research, a mode of inquiry in which the making of an artwork is itself a means of generating knowledge rather than a means of communicating knowledge obtained by other means. Nelson (2013) describes such research as combining know-how embedded in practice with the conceptual framing and documentation that allow that know-how to be shared and examined. Smith and Dean (2009) similarly argue that creative practice generates specialised insight which can subsequently be generalised and written up, and that the creative output and the written component are not independent of one another but work together to address a research question. The present project follows that structure: the film TOPONG constitutes the practice component, and this article constitutes the accompanying critical reflection.

Within that overall design, visual ethnography was adopted as the principal method of inquiry, because it allows the researcher to build a closer relationship with the subjects of the research than observation at a distance would permit. Presence in the field was not intended merely to gather data but to experience directly the life from which the Topèng Dhâlâng performance emerges. Pink (2021) emphasises that visual ethnography is not a matter of collecting images as evidence but of using image-making as a way of knowing that is reflexive, collaborative and attentive to the senses. That orientation shaped the fieldwork from the outset: the camera was treated as a participant in the encounter rather than as an instrument placed between the researcher and the community.

The theoretical framework is drawn from Judith Butler's account of gender as performative and is brought to bear at two points: during ethnographic reflection, when field material was re-read against the reflexive journal, and again during editing, when sequences were assembled and compared. It was deliberately not applied during observation itself, so that the performers' own descriptions of their work could be recorded before they were interpreted.

Site, Period, and Participants

Fieldwork was conducted in Dusun Semaan, Dasuk District, Sumenep Regency, Madura, East Java, a village in which Topèng Dhâlâng continues to be performed within its ritual and celebratory context rather than as a staged revival. Data were gathered between [month, year] and [month, year] through intermittent residence structured around the performance calendar of the community, comprising [n] field visits during which [n] complete performances and [n] rehearsals were observed, so that the researcher was present for ordinary days as well as for performance days.

The participants comprised the *dalang*, who narrates and voices all the characters; the masked dancers, including those who perform the female roles; the musicians of the *gamelan* ensemble; the mask keeper responsible for the storage and maintenance of the masks; and members of the surrounding community who attend and commission performances. Informants were selected by role rather than by name: every performer who had taken a female role in the troupe within the preceding five years was approached, together with the *dalang*, the mask keeper and two household heads who had commissioned performances. Participants were approached through the leadership of the troupe, and their involvement was voluntary and informed.

Data Collection

Four techniques were used in combination. Participant observation involved joining the activities of the performers over the whole arc of a performance event: the preparation of the venue, the opening of the mask chests, the fitting of costumes, the warming up of the ensemble, the performance itself, and the dispersal that follows it. Observation extended to rehearsals and to the ordinary sociality of the troupe outside performance, since the experiences that form these bodies are found as much in daily life, in the rehearsal space and backstage as they are on stage. Observation was recorded against a protocol organised under four headings: preparation, threshold, performance and return.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the *dalang*, the dancers, the musicians and community members. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and, with the assistance of local interlocutors, in Madurese, and were oriented towards experience rather than definition: performers were asked what they feel as the mask is put on, how they learned the movement quality of a female character, and how they understand the relationship between what they do on stage and who they are at home.

Audiovisual recording was carried out throughout, using a small camera operated by the researcher. Following MacDougall (2006), recording was treated as a form of attention rather than as documentation: the camera was held on gestures, hesitations and intervals that a documentary logic would discard. Finally, a reflexive journal was maintained in which the researcher recorded his own bodily and emotional responses, since in practice as research the researcher's subjectivity is a methodological resource that must be made visible rather than a source of contamination to be suppressed (Nelson, 2013).

Data Validation and Analysis

Because the research produces an artwork as well as a set of propositions, credibility was pursued through prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of source and technique, and member checking. Observation notes were compared with interview accounts and with the recorded material, so that a claim about, for example, the delay in returning to ordinary bearing after a performance was retained only where it was supported by all three. Sequences of the developing film and the interpretations attached to them were shown to the *dalang* and the performers, and were revised in the light of their responses.

Analysis proceeded in four steps. First, field notes, interview transcripts and journal entries were read and coded descriptively under categories generated from the material itself, among them learning, correction, putting on, taking off, orientation by sound, and offstage standing. Second, these categories were tested against the recorded material, and passages of footage were logged under the same codes, which allowed a category to be examined as duration and movement rather than only as report. Third, the categories were interpreted through Butler's account of performativity, which reorganised them around the distinction between an act repeated until it appears natural and an act understood as disguise. Fourth, the resulting propositions were carried into editing, where the assembly of comparable fragments across different performers either confirmed a category or, as in the case of the threshold moments, revised it. The argument presented in the following section follows the third and fourth of these steps rather than the chronology of the fieldwork.

Analytical Framework

The material was interpreted through a single primary lens: Judith Butler's account of gender as performative. Butler (1988, 1990) argues that gender is not an interior essence expressed outwardly but a stylised repetition of acts through which the appearance of an interior essence is produced; in a later formulation, performativity is described as the reiterative power of discourse to produce the very phenomena it regulates (Butler, 1993). Applied to Topèng

Dhâlâng, this suggests that the femininity of the female characters does not arise from a biological body but is built through movement, facial orientation and presence on stage, learned and repeated until it becomes convincing.

A single framework was used deliberately, rather than combining several theoretical vocabularies, because the performers' own accounts of their work were themselves plain and practical: they spoke of learning, correction and repetition, not of hidden layers of the self. Butler's idea that gender is something done rather than something possessed matched that account closely and was sufficient to organise the analysis. Where the discussion below turns to the mask itself, or to the choice of an experimental rather than a documentary form, it draws on the descriptive literature specific to those subjects, on masked performance (Emigh, 1996) and on ethnographic filmmaking (MacDougall, 2006; Russell, 1999; Nichols, 2017), rather than on a further, separate theory.

The Seven-Stage Creation Model

These perspectives were brought together in a model of film creation developed over the course of the project and comprising seven stages: visual ethnography, ethnographic reflection, aesthetic exploration, cinematic experiment, open production, editing as the discovery of meaning, and artistic reflection. The seven stages are not understood as a rigid sequence of steps but as interconnected processes that continued to develop throughout the making of the work; several of them ran concurrently, and the later stages repeatedly sent the process back to the earlier ones. Table 1 summarises the model.

Table 1. The seven-stage model of creation used in the making of TOPONG

Stage	Principal activity	Form of knowledge produced
1. Visual ethnography	Participant observation, interviews, audiovisual recording in the field	Descriptive and sensory familiarity with the performance and its social life
2. Ethnographic reflection	Re-reading field material against the reflexive journal	Identification of what mattered in the experience, as distinct from what was visible
3. Aesthetic exploration	Testing visual and sonic motifs derived from the field material	A working vocabulary of image, texture and rhythm
4. Cinematic experiment	Trials of framing, duration, sound placement and fragment order	Understanding of which cinematic relations carry the experience
5. Open production	Shooting without a locked script, responsive to events	Material shaped by the field rather than imposed upon it
6. Editing as discovery	Selecting, joining, removing and reordering fragments	Relations of meaning not anticipated during shooting
7. Artistic reflection	Critical review of the completed work against the research questions	Articulated knowledge transferable beyond the individual work

Choice of Form: Why Not Documentary

The decision not to make a documentary film requires explanation, since documentary would be the conventional response to a traditional performance. Nichols (2017) distinguishes several documentary modes, among them the expository mode that explains its subject to the viewer and the observational mode that watches without intervening. Neither corresponds to the aim of this project. The purpose was not to record the course of a performance factually but to

translate a cultural experience into the language of cinema. Experimental film was therefore selected as the medium that grants the freedom to construct new relationships between image, sound, body, space and time, and through which emotional, symbolic and reflective experience can be presented without being bound to a linear storyline or a conventional dramatic structure (Russell, 1999).

That choice was given further definition through an approach best described as poetic realism. Poetic realism here is not an attempt to beautify reality but a means of presenting cultural experience more deeply through cinematic language. The performance space, the sound of Madurese *tembang*, the movement of the performers, the light of the night, the coastal landscape and the silence behind the stage were treated not merely as visual settings but as elements that construct the aesthetic experience of the viewer. Reality, in this treatment, is not offered as objective documentation but as an experience that can be felt again through the force of image, sound, rhythm and atmosphere.

Research Ethics and Positionality

No institutional review board with jurisdiction over arts research operates at the author's institution, and consent was therefore secured on the basis recommended for cross-cultural filmmaking by Barbash and Taylor (1997). Informed consent was obtained orally and in the presence of the troupe leader from all participants, in Indonesian and, where necessary, in Madurese; permission to record within ritual contexts was negotiated separately with the household commissioning each performance; agreement was reached in advance over which material could be shown publicly and which could be used only for analysis; and the troupe is acknowledged as a collaborator rather than as a subject. The masks were filmed with the permission of their keeper and in accordance with the community's own protocols concerning their handling.

The author's position in this research is neither that of a detached observer nor that of a member of the community studied. He is a filmmaker and a teacher of recorded media arts, Javanese rather than Madurese, and without prior training in masked performance. That position carries evident limits of access and of linguistic competence, which are stated among the limitations below. It also carries a specific capacity, since the knowledge at issue in this study is knowledge of how a body is filmed and edited as much as knowledge of how it performs. Where the analysis reports what a sequence made visible, the author is reporting on his own practice, and that practice is documented here so that it can be examined rather than taken on trust.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Topèng Dhâlâng Sumenep: The Performance and Its Cultural Position

Topèng Dhâlâng brings together several artistic disciplines that in other traditions would be separated. Its performers are masked dancers who do not speak; its narrative is carried entirely by the *dalang*, who voices every character in turn and simultaneously directs the flow of the story; its accompaniment is a *gamelan* ensemble whose repertoire of *gendhing* (the composed pieces that structure a performance) marks entrances, transitions and emotional registers; and its repertoire draws on the Mahabharata and Ramayana cycles as they have been localised in Madura. The masks themselves are locally distinctive, generally smaller than their Javanese, Sundanese or Balinese counterparts and often leaving the chin exposed, and their colouring follows a codified symbolism of temperament rather than a naturalistic likeness (Rahayu et al., 2021).

What matters for the present argument is less the taxonomy of the form than its position in social life. Topèng Dhâlâng is commissioned. It is staged at weddings, at circumcision celebrations and above all at *rokat*. A troupe is therefore engaged not to provide a show but to

complete an obligation, and the performance is embedded within a longer sequence of hospitality, offering and communal gathering. Bouvier (2002) describes precisely this embeddedness across the Madurese performance economy: the aesthetic value of a performance is inseparable from its ritual efficacy and from the standing it confers on the household that commissions it. Turner's (1982) distinction between liminal ritual and liminoid entertainment is useful here without being decisive, since Topèng Dhâlâng occupies both positions at once; Schechner (2013) makes the same point more generally when he notes that efficacy and entertainment sit at two ends of a single continuum along which most performance actually moves. It is efficacious and it is enjoyed, and the men who perform it move between those registers within a single night.

This dual position is what makes the gender question in Topèng Dhâlâng specific. The male performer of a female role is not making a statement about gender; he is fulfilling a ritual and artistic obligation within a form whose casting convention long predates any contemporary discourse about identity. Any analysis that begins by treating the practice as transgression therefore misdescribes it from the outset. What the fieldwork encountered was not transgression but craft.

Masculinity Offstage: The Body in a Culture of Honour

To understand the significance of that craft, it is necessary to describe the gender order within which it operates. Madurese masculinity is commonly characterised through the values of *harga diri* (self-respect, or the honour attaching to a man's name), and through the obligation of a man to defend the dignity of his family. Wiyata (2002) analyses *carok* as the extreme expression of this obligation, showing that it is not random violence but a socially structured practice governed by rules of provocation, notification and aftermath, and legitimated by a shared understanding of what a man owes to his name. Rifai (2007) reads the same value complex through Madurese proverbs, in which endurance, religiosity, industriousness and refusal of humiliation recur as the defining attributes of manhood.

Connell's framework allows this to be stated more precisely. Hegemonic masculinity is not the masculinity of the majority but the culturally exalted configuration that legitimates the gender order and to which other masculinities stand in relations of complicity, subordination or marginalisation (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In Madura this exalted configuration is figured in the *blater* (the respected strong man of the village) and is symbolised in the *celurit* (the curved sickle that serves both as a farming tool and as the weapon of *carok*). It is important to note that Connell's framework also predicts what the fieldwork found: that the hegemonic configuration is an ideal rather than a description, that most men live in a complicit rather than an exemplary relation to it, and that its dominance is continually reproduced through practice rather than simply given.

The performers of Topèng Dhâlâng live within this order. Offstage they are farmers, traders and labourers, heads of households, participants in the religious life of the village. They are not marginal figures, and they are not understood by their community as deviating from the masculine norm. This is decisive for the argument that follows. The femininity they produce on stage is not a departure from an identity they hold offstage; it is a competence they exercise within a social position that remains intact. Sunardi (2009) reports a comparable situation in East Java, where cross-gender dancers negotiate between official ideologies of gender and the social realities of their own lives, using performance as a space in which the boundaries of maleness and femaleness can be pushed without being abandoned.

The Trained Body: Femininity as Corporeal Competence

The performance of Topèng Dhâlâng opens a space in which it becomes clear that the body never stands alone. The body always carries lived experience, cultural values, habits and ways

of seeing formed by its social environment. Understanding the bodies of the Topèng Dhâlâng performers therefore cannot be accomplished merely by observing the performance taking place on stage. The experiences that form these bodies are found in daily life, in the rehearsal space, backstage, and in the social relations that connect the performers with the community that supports them.

Field experience showed that the most compelling aspect of the work was not the story being staged but the change that takes place in the bodies of the performers. A male body that in daily life moves with a masculine character becomes, on entering the performance space, capable of presenting a different bodily quality through movement, rhythm and expression of a softer register. The shoulders drop and narrow. The line of the neck alters. The stride shortens, and its rhythm changes from a walk that covers ground to a walk that describes it. The fingers, which offstage carry the marks of agricultural labour, acquire an extended and deliberate articulation. None of this is improvised in the moment. It is the residue of years of correction, imitation and repetition.

Performers themselves describe this acquisition in terms of learning rather than of feeling. Asked how a female character is arrived at, they speak of watching senior performers, of being corrected on the height of the elbow or the angle of the head, of practising a transition until it no longer requires thought. This is precisely the structure that Butler's account of performativity describes: gender is constituted through a stylised repetition of acts, and the appearance of a stable interior gender is an effect produced by that repetition rather than its cause (Butler, 1988, 1990). The femininity of the female characters in Topèng Dhâlâng is not disclosed by the body; it is achieved by it. Butler's (1993) later emphasis on the reiterative and citational character of performativity is equally apposite, since what the performer cites is not femininity in general but a specific, locally codified repertoire of feminine bodily signs sanctioned by the tradition.

This finding should be distinguished from the claim that the performance is subversive. Butler's framework is frequently invoked to argue that cross-gender performance denaturalises gender and thereby destabilises it. In Topèng Dhâlâng the effect within the community is close to the opposite: the performance is entirely conventional, sanctioned by tradition, and produces no perceptible disturbance in the gender order of the village. What it does demonstrate, however, is the same underlying proposition from which the subversive reading proceeds, namely that the corporeal signs of gender are separable from the bodies that carry them and can be learned. The tradition, in other words, has long known in practice what the theory articulates in argument. This qualifies rather than confirms the standard reception of Butler in performance studies, and suggests that the political valence of a cross-gender practice is supplied by its institutional setting rather than by the fact of crossing itself.

Threshold Moments: Putting On and Taking Off

The most analytically productive moments observed in the field were not those of the performance proper but those immediately preceding and following it. When a performer lifts a mask towards his face, there is a brief interval in which he is neither himself nor the character. The hands are still his own; the face is already withdrawing. Observation of these intervals, repeated across many performances, revealed a consistent sequence: a pause, a settling of the breath, a lowering of the gaze, and only then the fitting of the mask and the assumption of the character's stance. The change is not instantaneous, and it is not theatrical. It resembles the entering of a room.

The removal of the mask displays the same structure in reverse, and is if anything more striking. A performer who has spent the night as a refined female character does not resume his ordinary bearing at once. There is a period, sometimes lasting several minutes, in which the body retains something of the quality it has been carrying while the face has already

returned. Performers describe this as needing a moment, or as the character not yet having left. These threshold moments are of considerable importance for the argument developed here, because they demonstrate that the transformation is corporeal rather than merely representational. A costume can be removed instantly. A trained bodily disposition cannot. Emigh's (1996) account of masked performance anticipates this in principle, but locates the instability of the character within the performance; the Madurese material shows that it also extends beyond the performance in measurable duration, which is a finding available to a camera and an editing timeline rather than to observation alone.

The Mask as Medium of Transformation

At the same time, the mask brings a different layer of meaning. The mask is not simply an object that covers the face but a medium that enables the body to enter an inner experience and another identity. Emigh (1996) formulates this precisely: the mask constitutes a meeting place in which the self encounters the otherness inherent in the object, producing a character that is neither wholly the performer nor wholly the figure represented, and whose instability is the source of its power. The Madurese practice supports this reading. The masks are kept in wooden chests, cleaned before use, and handled with a care that exceeds what their material value would warrant. They are not props. They are treated as things that carry something.

Read alongside Butler's account of gender as a repeated, learned practice, the mask can be understood in a straightforward way, as a prompt that supports that repetition. It gives the performer a fixed external form to move toward, so that the work of recalling and reproducing a feminine bodily vocabulary, built over years of training, has an external anchor to organise itself around. Performers describe the mask in exactly these terms: several said that once the mask is on, the correct way of moving comes more easily, because the mask reminds the body of what it has already learned.

What the mask changes, on this account, is not a hidden part of the self but the performer's access to a bodily repertoire that is otherwise held in reserve. That repertoire is not private; it is a culturally organised practice with a long history, transmitted by the tradition and rehearsed by the troupe, and the range of expression it makes available to a male body is provided by the institution of Topèng Dhâlâng rather than by any one performer's individual disposition.

The mask also alters perception in a directly practical sense. Madurese masks frequently restrict the visual field severely, and in the Sumenep style many masks have no mouth opening at all, which is precisely why the *dalang* carries all the dialogue. Deprived of speech and of peripheral vision, the performer must orient by sound and by the memory of the space. Several performers described listening for the *gendhing* and for the *dalang*'s voice as their means of locating themselves. The mask, in other words, does not merely change how the body is seen; it changes how the body senses, and thereby how it moves.

Language, Sound and the Sensory Field of the Performance

The Madurese language is a further element in the aesthetic constitution of the performance. Dialogue, *tembang* and the *dalang*'s narration together form an experience in which language does not merely convey the story but brings rhythm, emotion and cultural memory that fuse with the movement of the performers. Because the masked bodies are silent, the relationship between voice and body in Topèng Dhâlâng is unusual: a single voice animates many bodies, and the bodies must find their movement inside a vocal rhythm that they do not themselves produce.

This produces a distinctive sensory field. The *gamelan* establishes a temporal grid; the *dalang*'s voice supplies emotional inflection and narrative direction; the *ghungseng* (the ankle bells worn by the dancers) register every shift of weight and turn the body itself into an instrument.

Silence, when it arrives, is not the absence of the performance but part of its structure. Attending to this field, rather than to the story, was decisive for the creative work, because it revealed that the experience of Topèng Dhâlâng is fundamentally multisensory and only secondarily narrative. Pink's (2021) insistence that ethnography must attend to the senses gave this observation its methodological grounding, and MacDougall's (2006) argument for a corporeal image indicates why a written report of it would be insufficient.

Translating Tradition into Cinema

The experience obtained during fieldwork was not transferred directly into the form of a film. Film creation was understood not as a process of recording reality but as a process of translating cultural experience into the language of cinema. The point of departure was therefore not the wish to document the Topèng Dhâlâng performance in its entirety, but to make present again the experience felt while living among the performers, watching performances, and encountering the bodies, masks, language and cultural space that surround them. The process did not move from screenplay to production; it grew organically through a dialogue between field experience and artistic exploration. Table 2 sets out the principal correspondences between what was found in the field and the cinematic strategies through which each finding was translated.

Table 2. Correspondences between field findings and cinematic strategy in TOPONG

Field finding	Cinematic strategy	Intended effect on the viewer
Femininity is a trained corporeal competence	Sustained close framing on hands, neck and shoulders rather than on faces	Attention shifts from who the performer is to what the body is doing
Transformation occurs at thresholds, not on cue	Long takes across the putting on and removal of the mask, without cutaway	The change is experienced as duration rather than announced as an event
The mask restricts sight and speech	Passages in which the image narrows and the sound field widens	The viewer approaches the performer's altered sensorium
Sound organises the body's movement	Sound designed as an autonomous layer, at times preceding or outlasting the image	Hearing leads seeing, as it does for the masked performer
Performance is embedded in ordinary space	Village road, coastline, courtyard and night sky treated as narrative agents	Tradition is located within a life rather than isolated on a stage
Meaning is not delivered in propositional form	Fragmentary, non-linear structure with unresolved intervals	The viewer composes an interpretation rather than receiving one

The body as visual language

The body became the principal element in that translation. In the film TOPONG the body is not treated as a medium for conveying a story but as a visual language that constructs cinematic experience. Slow movement, a calm gaze, the change of gesture as the mask is put on, and the silence after it is removed all became important in constructing meaning. The camera does not merely follow the actions of the performers but attempts to capture the small changes taking place within their bodies. Through the body, the film invites the viewer to feel the process of transformation rather than simply to witness it. This is where MacDougall's

(2006) argument for a corporeal image becomes operative: the knowledge at stake is knowledge of a body in change, and it is not reducible to a verbal statement about that change.

The mask as the pivot of the visual construction

The mask then became the centre of the film's visual construction. In performance, the mask functions as the identity of a character. In the film TOPONG, the mask is treated as a symbol of the passage between everyday life and the space of performance. The moments in which the mask is put on and removed receive attention equal in importance to the scenes of performance themselves. At those points the camera does not merely record an action but presents the experience of a body slowly entering another world formed by tradition, memory and imagination. Filming these passages in unbroken takes was a deliberate methodological decision as much as an aesthetic one: cutting within them would have converted a process into an effect, and would have concealed exactly the duration that the fieldwork had identified as significant.

Cultural space as narrative agent

Besides the body and the mask, the cultural space of Madura is an inseparable part of the film's cinematic language. Traditional houses, the yard where performances take place, the coastline, the village road, the night sky and the area behind the stage were chosen not merely for their visual value but because each space holds a close relationship with the life of the community. Space is treated as part of the narrative, so that its presence does not merely serve as a backdrop but participates in building atmosphere, rhythm and emotional experience throughout the film. This choice also carries an argument: by placing the performance within the ordinary geography that produces it, the film resists the framing that isolates traditional performance as a spectacle detached from the life of its practitioners.

Sound as an equal partner

The Madurese language is likewise an important element in the translation of tradition into cinema. Dialogue, *tembang*, the *dalang*'s voice, the sound of the *gamelan* and the everyday sounds of the community were retained as part of the cultural identity that shapes the experience of the performance. In the film TOPONG, sound does not function as a complement to the image but occupies an equal position in the construction of meaning. The rhythm of the language, the musicality of the *tembang* and the silences that emerge between those sounds present an experience that cannot always be explained through the image alone. In several passages the sound of a performance precedes the image of it by a considerable interval, or continues after the image has moved elsewhere, so that the viewer hears the performance before or after seeing it, in an approximation of the masked performer's own condition.

Fragment and rhythm

The choice of the experimental film form gave freedom to arrange a more fluid relationship between image, sound, space and time. The film is not built through a linear dramatic structure but develops through fragments of experience that relate to one another. This approach allows the viewer to build an emotional relationship with the film through association, memory and aesthetic experience arising during the act of watching. The film does not direct the viewer towards a single meaning but opens space for a range of possible interpretations.

This was a practical decision as much as an aesthetic one. A film that explained Topèng Dhâlâng in a conventional expository structure, of the kind Nichols (2017) associates with mainstream documentary, would have placed the viewer in the position of being taught about a tradition rather than encountering it directly. Presenting the material in fragments, closer to the discontinuous way the fieldwork itself was experienced, day by day and performance by performance, was judged more faithful to what the research had actually found: a set of impressions, thresholds and repetitions rather than a single continuous story.

Editing as the Discovery of Meaning

The editing process provided an experience no less important than the fieldwork. At this stage, various fragments of image and sound began to form new relationships that had not always been apparent while the material was being shot. Editing did not merely function to arrange the sequence of scenes; it became a space of reflection in which meaning continued to develop. Through the process of selecting, connecting, removing and rearranging visual fragments, the film slowly found its own form. For this reason, editing became an important part of the whole process of creation rather than merely a final stage of production.

Several of the findings reported earlier in this article were in fact produced at the editing table rather than in the field. The significance of the threshold moments, for instance, became fully apparent only when a sequence of mask removals was assembled and viewed consecutively; the recurrence across different performers of the same delayed return to ordinary bearing was not visible in any single observation. Similarly, the decision to let sound precede image emerged from an accidental juxtaposition during assembly, and only afterwards was recognised as corresponding to the performers' own accounts of orienting themselves by sound. This is the clearest demonstration in the project of the claim advanced by Nelson (2013) and by Smith and Dean (2009) that creative practice generates specialised insight rather than merely expressing it, and it is the strongest argument for treating the film as a research instrument rather than as a research output. It also qualifies Grimshaw and Ravetz's (2009) reassessment of observational cinema, which locates the analytical work of the filmmaker chiefly in the encounter with the subject; in this project the decisive analytical moment occurred after the encounter, in the assembly of material that observation had gathered without yet understanding.

Negotiation Rather Than Disguise

The process of creation made increasingly clear that the femininity presented by the performers is not a form of disguise applied over a male identity. Femininity is present as the result of a process of learning, internalisation and repetition that takes place within the tradition of performance. The male body does not lose its masculinity when playing a female character; rather, it demonstrates its capacity to present another bodily quality in accordance with the demands of the performance. From this experience, masculinity and femininity appear not as two identities that cancel one another out but as two bodily experiences that can be present alongside one another within an artistic space.

This is the sense in which the term negotiation is used in the title of this article. Negotiation does not here mean compromise between two parties, nor a weakening of one term by the other. It names a relation in which two configurations of bodily practice are held simultaneously by the same person, each activated in its proper context, neither cancelling the other. The performer who plays a refined female character on Saturday night and defends his family's honour on Sunday morning is not inconsistent. He is competent in two repertoires, and the tradition supplies the frame within which that dual competence is intelligible and respectable.

This finding aligns with and extends Sunardi's (2009, 2015) account of East Javanese cross-gender dance, in which performers use the stage to negotiate between competing ideas of manhood and womanhood without resolving the tension between them. It extends that account by locating the same phenomenon within a gender order organised around honour rather than around refinement, where the hegemonic model of masculinity is considerably less accommodating of ambiguity. That the negotiation persists in such a setting suggests that its enabling condition is the institutional sanction of the tradition rather than the permissiveness of the surrounding gender ideology. Ross and Nini Thowok (2005) describe an analogous, though differently situated, articulation of gender fluidity as an aesthetic and spiritual position

rather than a personal claim; the Madurese case differs from theirs in that no such articulation is offered by the performers themselves, which suggests that the reflexive framing of cross-gender performance as a philosophy is a feature of the metropolitan and professional context rather than of the practice as such. Emigh's (1996) account of masked performance as a play of self and other supplies the general form of which the Madurese case is a particular instance.

What the Creation Made Available for Understanding

The process of creating the film TOPONG did not only produce a cinematic work; it also brought forward a new understanding of the relationship between body, mask and culture. The various experiences obtained during fieldwork underwent a change on entering the space of creation. Those experiences no longer appeared as a collection of data or ethnographic notes but developed into an artistic experience that continually shaped the direction of the film. In this process, meaning did not appear suddenly but grew through repeated encounters between observation, reflection and creation.

One thing that became increasingly evident during that process is that the bodies of the Topèng Dhâlâng performers hold knowledge that extends far beyond the capacity to play a character. Movement, gaze, walking rhythm and the manner of putting on the mask are the results of long experience transmitted through training and performance practice. When the body enters the performance space, what is at work is not only technical skill but also cultural memory that has become embedded in the performers. The body becomes a space in which tradition continues to live and to be transmitted without always having to be spoken in words.

The use of an experimental cinematic language also showed that cultural experience does not always have to be conveyed through a linear storyline. Through fragments of image, editing rhythm, sound composition and spaces of silence, the film is able to present an experience closer to the way in which a person remembers, feels and gives meaning to an event. This approach makes it possible for the viewer to build a more personal relationship with the film, without having to be directed towards a single interpretation.

From this whole process, the creation of TOPONG brings forward the understanding that tradition is not something frozen and worth maintaining only as an inheritance from the past. Tradition is a cultural experience that continues to move, to change and to acquire new meaning through each generation that brings it back to life. Film becomes one of the spaces in which that process takes place, not in order to replace the Topèng Dhâlâng performance but to present another way of reading and feeling the cultural experience it contains.

Contribution and Limitations

The contribution of this creation lies not only in the production of a film but also in the way of seeing it offers for reading traditional performing arts. Experimental film was chosen because it grants the freedom to present cultural experience more reflectively, without being bound to a conventional narrative structure. The approach shows that the medium of film has the capacity to construct an experience different from that of the performance itself, while also opening space for the viewer to form an interpretation of what they see and feel.

In addition, this research offers a model of creation that positions visual ethnography as an integral part of the artistic process. Field experience does not stop at the level of data collection but continues to live at every stage of creation, from the formulation of the concept, through visual exploration and the production process, to editing. A model of this kind shows that artistic research can produce knowledge through creative practice, while also widening the possible relationships between research and creation in film studies. For local performing arts scholarship in Indonesia, the seven-stage model set out in Table 1 is offered as a transferable protocol rather than as a description of a single project, and it is designed to be adaptable to other forms in which embodied practice exceeds what description can capture.

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a single troupe in a single village, and the conventions of Topèng Dhâlâng differ between the Slopeng and Kalianget styles and between Sumenep and Pamekasan; the findings should not be generalised across Madura without further work. Second, the researcher conducted fieldwork primarily in Indonesian, with assistance for Madurese, and some nuance in the performers' self-description will inevitably have been lost in that mediation. Third, the study does not include the perspective of audiences, whose reception of the female characters would be necessary to establish how the negotiation described here is understood by the community at large. Each of these limitations indicates a direction for subsequent research.

CONCLUSION

The femininity produced by male performers in Topèng Dhâlâng Sumenep is a learned corporeal competence rather than a disguise. It is achieved through correction and repetition within a sanctioned tradition, and it coexists with the performers' masculinity rather than displacing it, so that the relation between the two is properly described as negotiation: two configurations of bodily practice held by the same person, each activated in its proper context. The mask, in turn, functions as a threshold rather than a covering. It alters not only how the body is seen but how it senses and moves, and the intervals of putting it on and taking it off carry as much meaning as the staged performance, since a trained bodily disposition, unlike a costume, cannot be set aside at once.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in what this case does to the standard reception of gender performativity in performance scholarship. Cross-gender performance is ordinarily read as denaturalising and therefore destabilising the gender order; in Sumenep it demonstrates the separability of gendered bodily signs from the bodies that carry them while leaving the local gender order entirely intact. The political valence of such a practice is therefore supplied by its institutional setting rather than by the fact of crossing, and a culture of honour proves compatible with an established male competence in feminine bodily vocabulary. Methodologically, the study shows that an experimental film grounded in visual ethnography generates knowledge that descriptive documentation cannot reach, because the assembly of comparable fragments makes visible patterns across time and across performers that no single observation discloses. The seven-stage model set out here is offered to practitioner-researchers as a transferable protocol, and the case supports a practical recommendation for those who work with custodian communities: that the threshold, and not only the performance, deserves to be recorded.

The limits of the study are those of a single troupe in a single village, of fieldwork conducted largely in Indonesian rather than Madurese, and of an account that does not include the audience. Topèng Dhâlâng differs between the Slopeng and Kalianget styles and between Sumenep and Pamekasan, and the findings should not be carried across Madura without further work. Three lines of research follow directly. A comparative study across troupes and regencies would establish whether the threshold phenomenon described here is general or local. An audience study would establish how the community itself understands the femininity it watches and commissions. And a study of transmission, following young performers through the acquisition of the feminine repertoire, would test the account of learning offered here against the process as it actually unfolds.

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Ethical approval and informed consent. No institutional review board with jurisdiction over arts research operates at the author's institution. Informed consent was obtained orally from all participants in the presence of the troupe leader, in Indonesian and, where necessary, in Madurese, and permission to record within ritual contexts was negotiated separately with the household commissioning each performance. Consent to publish images and recordings was obtained from those depicted and from the keeper of the masks.

Data availability. The field notes, interview transcripts, reflexive journal and unedited audiovisual material underlying the findings are held by the author at the Faculty of Recorded Media Arts, Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta. They may be consulted on reasonable request and with the prior agreement of the troupe, since the recordings include ritual contexts and identify participants. The completed film TOPONG is available for scholarly screening on request.

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