

Social Criticism in Digital Wayang: Narrative Adaptation of Javanese Shadow Puppetry in New Media

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the persistence and transformation of the Javanese shadow puppet (wayang kulit) in the context of rapid developments in information and communication technology. Rather than experiencing decline, wayang kulit demonstrates a strong capacity for adaptation by utilising social media as a new public sphere. This research employs a qualitative approach, using narrative analysis to focus on story structures and dialogic interactions as carriers of meaning. The data consist of four YouTube videos of wayang kulit performances by Ki Seno Nugrobo, selected based on the highest viewer counts. Ki Seno Nugrobo was chosen for his consistent engagement with digital platforms and his broader audience reach than other puppeteers. The findings reveal that Punokawan characters (Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong) are repositioned as central figures who represent marginalised communities. Through these characters, the performances articulate multidirectional social criticism, targeting elite behaviour, moral degradation, social inequality, conspiratorial practices, and coercive communication styles. Importantly, the study finds a shift in narrative authority, where solutions to social problems are no longer dominated by aristocratic elites but are instead grounded in the voices and experiences of ordinary people. This study contributes to the field of cultural communication and narratology by demonstrating how traditional art forms can function as critical discursive spaces in digital environments. It also highlights the concept of adaptive cultural resilience, in which traditional narratives not only survive but also gain renewed relevance within algorithm-driven media ecosystems.

Keywords: Social Criticism, Digital Wayang, Narrative Adaptation, New Media

Abstract

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kelangsungan dan transformasi wayang kulit Jawa dalam konteks perkembangan pesat teknologi informasi dan komunikasi. Alih-alih mengalami kemunduran, wayang kulit justru menunjukkan kemampuan adaptasi yang kuat dengan memanfaatkan media sosial sebagai ruang publik baru. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan

kualitatif melalui analisis naratif, dengan fokus pada struktur cerita dan interaksi dialogis sebagai pembawa makna. Data terdiri dari empat video YouTube pertunjukan wayang kulit oleh Ki Seno Nugroho yang dipilih berdasarkan jumlah penonton terbanyak. Ki Seno Nugroho dipilih karena keterlibatannya yang konsisten dengan platform digital dan jangkauan penontonnya yang lebih luas dibandingkan dengan dalang lainnya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa karakter Punokawan (Semar, Gareng, Petruk, dan Bagong) diposisikan ulang sebagai tokoh sentral yang mewakili komunitas terpinggirkan. Melalui karakter-karakter ini, pertunjukan tersebut mengartikulasikan kritik sosial multidirectional yang menargetkan perilaku elit, degradasi moral, ketidaksetaraan sosial, praktik konspiratif, dan gaya komunikasi yang memaksa. Yang penting, studi ini menemukan pergeseran otoritas naratif, di mana solusi atas masalah sosial tidak lagi didominasi oleh elit aristokrat, melainkan didasarkan pada suara dan pengalaman orang-orang biasa. Studi ini berkontribusi pada bidang komunikasi budaya dan naratologi dengan menunjukkan bagaimana bentuk-bentuk seni tradisional dapat berfungsi sebagai ruang diskursif kritis dalam lingkungan digital. Studi ini juga menyoroti konsep ketahanan budaya adaptif, di mana narasi tradisional tidak hanya bertahan, tetapi juga memperoleh relevansi baru dalam ekosistem media yang digerakkan oleh algoritma.

Keywords: Kritik Sosial, Wayang Digital, Narasi Adaptasi, Media Baru

INTRODUCTION

Wayang kulit is one of the performing arts that has developed widely in various regions of Indonesia, such as Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Nusa Tenggara.¹ In Java, especially Central Java and Yogyakarta, the story of wayang, originating in India, underwent localisation through the integration of local cultural values and adjustments to Islamic teachings.² In practice, puppetry not only serves as entertainment but also as a medium for social reflection and the transmission of values. Etymologically, the term "puppet" is often interpreted as "shadow", referring to the shadow-based performance technique behind the shadow. M.C. Ricklefs (2008) emphasised that Javanese puppetry is the result of syncretism between Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.³ This multicultural character makes puppetry flexible as a medium of social communication, ranging from maintaining community harmony, socialisation of development programs, to educational innovations such as the use of puppets in mathematics learning and its transformation into comic media by R.A. Kosasih.⁴ This phenomenon shows that puppets have strong cross-medium adaptability in responding to the changing times.⁴

From a functional-structural perspective, as argued by Talcott Parsons, cultural adaptability in puppetry reflects the tendency of social systems towards equilibrium⁵. However,

¹ LLC, *Wayang Kulit: Coloring Pages for Kids and Kids at Heart*, vol. 26, Hands-On Art History Series (London: Blue Ivy Press, 2017), 28.

² M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1200*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2008), 75.

³ A. Jasni and J. Zulikha, "Utilising Wayang Kulit for Deep-Learning in Mathematics," *Proceedings of the World Congress on Engineering 2013*, vol. II (London, July 3–5, 2013).

⁴ R. A. Kosasih, *Mahabharata* (Jakarta: Ermar Press, 1976).

⁵ R. Panuju, *Indonesia's Broadcasting System—A Review of Functional Structuralism*, 2nd

this dynamic faces new challenges due to digital communication technology, which significantly changes the structure of social interaction. The concept of community, previously based on geography and values, has now shifted to a network-based one (network society). John Vivian (2008) emphasised that new media, such as the internet, can extend beyond the reach of traditional media, while Nasrullah added characteristics of digital media, such as interactivity, archiving, and simulation. Several previous studies have shown that digital transformation in the performing arts often focuses on technical aspects such as content digitisation and platform distribution, but remains limited in examining how the substance of cultural narratives transforms within digital contexts. Mohammad Farokh Purboyo's (2011) research, for example, shows that the duration of puppet performances has become shorter through the concept of "compact puppetry", but it does not discuss in depth changes in the structure of messages and social criticism in the puppet narrative itself⁶. This is where a research gap warrants further study⁷.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyse how the adaptation of puppets in the digital era occurs not only in technological terms but also in the transformation of narratives, especially in the construction of social criticism.⁸ The main focus of this research is on the practice of digitising puppet performances on YouTube, which allows a much wider audience reach than conventional performances. One of the central figures in this phenomenon is Ki Seno Nugroho, a puppeteer known as a pioneer in popularising digital puppets, with a significant following on online platforms. The uniqueness of Ki Seno lies in its exploration of Punokawan as the narrative centre, which conveys criticism of contemporary social reality.⁹

This article argues that the digitisation of wayang kulit not only expands the distribution of performances but also reconstructs the cultural function of wayang as a medium of social criticism, making it more contextual and relevant to modern society. Through an analysis of the narrative of Ki Seno Nugroho's performance, this study will demonstrate that Punokawan characters have undergone a repositioning from merely a complementary element to a primary instrument in constructing a critical discourse on social, political, and moral issues. Thus,

⁶ M. F. Purboyo, "The Changes in the Performance of Wayang Kulit in Surakarta" (Thesis, Sebelas March University, 2011).

⁷ R. Nasrullah, *Theory and Research of Cyber Media* (Jakarta: Kencana Prenadamedia Group, 2014).

⁸ A. B. Lazuardi, Pawito, and Agung Satyawan, "Performing Arts as Communication: The Traditional Media of Wayang Sasak in Digital Era," *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding* 7, no. 7 (2020): 121–128.

⁹ Tabloid Bintang, "Remembering the 1990s Version of 'Mahabharata' that Was Broadcast on TPI," March 27, 2014, accessed February 15, 2021.

wayang kulit in the digital era not only survives as cultural heritage but also transforms into a critical communication medium adaptable to social change.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach, employing narrative analysis to examine the construction of meaning in digital puppet performances. Narrative analysis refers to Littlejohn's view that treats narrative as a story structure with a certain form, plot, and communicative function. This approach was chosen because the object of research is digital text (a YouTube video of puppet performances), which is understood as a sign system that can be analysed for meaning. In particular, this study adopts the actual model of Greimas as described by Nasrullah (2014, p.187–188), which emphasises the relationships between elements in the narrative, such as subjects, objects, senders, receivers, adjuvants, and opponents, to reveal the structure of the story and the messages contained in it.¹⁰

The research was carried out during January–March 2026, with a focus on the digital space, namely the YouTube channel that broadcasts performances of Ki Seno Nugroho's puppet show. The data collection technique is carried out in three ways.¹¹ First, non-participatory observation of the video of a puppet show that has a total of more than 1 million viewers, with a focus on plays featuring Punokawan characters. Second, documentation in the form of audiovisual (video) data collection, dialogue transcripts, and metadata such as the number of viewers, duration, and upload time. Third, in-depth interviews were conducted purposively with relevant informants, namely digital puppet connoisseurs, cultural communication academics, and performing arts practitioners, to strengthen the interpretation of the analysed narrative.

Data analysis techniques are carried out gradually and systematically. The first stage is data reduction, selecting videos that meet the research criteria. The second stage is narrative categorisation, which involves identifying the structure of the acts (subjects, objects, senders, receivers, supporters, and inhibitors) in each play. The third stage is the interpretation of meaning by examining how Punokawan figures are constructed as a medium of social criticism in a digital context. To maintain the validity of the data, this study employs source triangulation (videos, transcripts, and interviews) and theoretical triangulation by comparing findings with concepts from narratology and digital media. The results of the analysis are then presented in a

¹⁰ B. Herusatoto, *Javanese Mythology* (Yogyakarta: LKiS Pelangi Aksara, 2020).

¹¹ S. W. Littlejohn, *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (California: SAGE Publications, 2009).

descriptive-analytical manner to explain the transformation of the puppet narrative in the digital era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study uses four videos of Ki Seno Nugroho's puppet show that meet two criteria: the dominance of Punokawan characters and the high number of viewers. Methodologically, this selection is based not only on popularity but also on the intensity of public reception of social-criticism narratives in digital media.

Table 1. Research Object

Yes	Video Title	Viewer	Duration	References
1	Bagong Lucu Kesaktian Semar Bodronoyo	1,570,362	1:47:09	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0cFWuYjbMM
2	Petruk Metu Sore, Sakti Mandraguna Ngobrak Abrik Ngastino	1,096,446	2:00:39	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsjGphnFiMg
3	Lahire Wisanggeni	849,859	35:35	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ukw94YXrN1w
4	Bagong Dakwah	581,097	44:44	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65rqncR-C9E

Source: YouTube

Analytically, the high number of viewers shows that Punokawan-based narratives have strong social resonance. This indicates that digital audiences are not only consuming entertainment but also responding to messages of social criticism packaged in traditional narrative structures. According to Indonesian cultural scholar Emha Ainun Nadjib (2019), Punokawan is referred to as the "undercurrent" (republished), representing marginalised human figures in social processes across sociological, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Through these figures, the reality of society in general is highlighted as important issues to ponder and discuss, and as an inspiration for state rulers to be wise.¹².

The term Punokawan is said to come from the words Pana, meaning "knowing," and kawan, meaning "friend." Punokawan characteristically actually represents a general human

¹² Icol Dianto, Leli Asyuro Nasution, and Mohd Rafiq, 'Netizens' Communication Ethics on Instagram in Islamic Perspective', *Communicator: Journal of Communication* 2, no. 1 (May 2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.59373/comm.v2i1.98>.

profile. They are multifaceted figures who can serve as advisors to rulers, knights, or even gods. Punokawan also means servant. In the world of puppetry, you can distinguish between servants of good characters and bad characters. Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong were well represented among the servants.



Figure 1: The Shape of the Puppet

Narrative Patterns: Reproduction of Crises and the Mechanisms of "Scapegoating"

Cross-case analysis reveals repetitive and systemic narrative patterns. The structure of the story in the four videos can be reduced to the following schemes: the social crisis → the failure of the elite → the transfer of responsibility → the people as victims → the intervention of Punokawan. This pattern shows that the narrative of Ki Seno Nugroho's puppet is not merely epic but also a consistent critique of power relations. In the second and fourth videos, for example, Petruk is used as a "tumbal" to solve the country's crisis. This illustrates the practice of scapegoating, a social mechanism in which systemic failures victimise weak groups.

Theoretically, these findings extend Greimas' actuarial model. If, in the classical model, the opposition occurs between the subject and the opponent, then in this case, a new configuration emerges: the elite as the pseudo-subject, and the Punokawan is the real moral subject. That is, the centre of moral legitimacy in the narrative is no longer in the power structure, but in the representation of the people.

Repositioning of the Punisher: From Comic Relief to Critical Agency

The most significant transformation lies in the repositioning of Punokawan. They no longer serve as peripheral elements of humour, but as active and reflective agents of social criticism. This can be seen in the following criticism system:

Table 2. Social Criticism through Punokawan

Yes Punokawan		Critics	Criticism Content
1	Semar	Druna	Criticism of religious elites that produces conflict
2	Semar	Kresna	Criticism of material orientation in leadership
3	Semar	Bathara Guru	Criticism of the abuse of power
4	Semar	Bagong	Internal criticism of the ethics of the younger generation
5	Semar	Sengkuni	Criticism of manipulative elites
6	Bagong	Semar	Criticism of the dominance of the older generation
7	Bagong	Gendro Suwaropati	Criticism of materialism and authoritarian power

If analysed more deeply, this table shows three important things: the social criticism raised in the narrative of Ki Seno Nugroho's puppet does not move linearly or in one direction, but is multidirectional. This means that the flow of criticism not only comes from the lower group (the people) to the upper group (the power elite), but also occurs horizontally and even internally among actors in relatively equal social positions. In several scenes, Punokawan not only criticises kings, nobles, and gods but also corrects others, including Bagong, for criticising Semar as an elder. ¹³figure. This pattern suggests the presence of social reflexivity in the narrative, where each actor is not rigidly positioned as right or wrong but is open to moral

¹³ Magdalena Charlan Biru and Pupung Arifin, 'The Role of Media and Communication Channels in the Socialization of the Mimika Smart City Program', *Communicator: Journal of Communication* 2, no. 1 (May 2025): 1, <https://doi.org/10.59373/comm.v2i1.100>.

evaluation. Thus, the puppet narrative not only represents social conflicts but also provides a discursive space for collective reflection on the values, norms, and practices of social life.

In this context, Punokawan plays an important role as a moral mediator, bridging the world of power and the realities of society. Semar, as a central figure, functions as an *ethical stabiliser*, a keeper of balance among values, directing the narrative towards social harmony. He not only advises, but also corrects deviations without creating a destructive escalation of conflict. On the other hand, Bagong and Petruk appear as *disruptive critics* who more frontally and straightforward convey criticism of injustice, hypocrisy, and ethical deviations committed by the elite. The combination of Semar's role in moral stabilisation and Bagong and Petruk's disruptive criticism creates a balanced narrative dynamic: criticism remains sharp and relevant without losing its orientation toward social harmony. This is where the power of the puppet narrative lies: its ability to integrate social criticism with local wisdom values that emphasise balance and order.

Furthermore, these findings show a process of deconstruction of the narrative hierarchy in the puppet tradition. If, in the classical structure, the figures of nobles and gods are positioned as the centre of truth and moral authority, then in Ki Seno Nugroho's narrative, there is a significant shift. The truth is no longer monopolised by elite actors, but is produced discursively by marginal figures such as Punokawan. They are not only complementary stories or humour inserts but also a source of moral legitimacy closer to the reality of people's lives. Thus, this digital puppet narrative not only reproduces the social structure but also criticises and deconstructs the hierarchy by placing the voice of the people at the centre of meaning-making. This transformation marks an important change in the function of puppetry, from a medium of power legitimacy to a medium of critical reflection on power itself.

Dialogue as an Arena for the Production of Critical Discourse

Unlike conventional narrative analysis, which emphasises plot, this study finds that dialogue is the primary locus of meaning production. The dialogue in the four videos not only conveys the story but also builds a critical discourse through several mechanisms:

- Irony and humour as a criticism strategy: criticism is conveyed without direct resistance from the audience
- Value confrontation: materialism vs spirituality, power vs morality

- Symbolic delegitimisation of the elite: figures such as Druna and Sengkuni are constructed as sources of social dysfunction

In this context, dialogue serves as what can be called "discursive resistance", which is a form of symbolic resistance to the domination of power through language. In the puppet show Ki Seno Nugroho, dialogue not only conveys the storyline but also serves as a strategic arena for effectively expressing social criticism. One of the main mechanisms used is irony and humour as strategies of criticism. Through this approach, critical messages are not conveyed in a confrontational or frontal manner. Still, they are wrapped in humour, subtle satire, and language play familiar to the audience's daily lives. This strategy allows criticism to be received without generating direct resistance, either from the audience or from the object of criticism itself. Humour in this context is not just entertainment but a medium that softens messages while strengthening the penetration power of criticism within social consciousness. In other words, irony and humour serve as "safe vehicles" for conveying messages that are substantially sensitive and potentially controversial.

In addition, dialogue among puppets reveals the confrontation of values at the core of the narrative conflict. The values of materialism are often contrasted with spirituality, while domination-oriented power is contrasted with morality based on justice and wisdom. This conflict not only appears in the background of the story but is also explicitly articulated through conversations between characters, especially by Punokawan. In many cases, elite figures are portrayed as trapped in material orientations and power interests, while Punokawan presents an alternative perspective that is more ethical and reflective. This confrontation of values invites the audience to evaluate the social reality they face and to question the standard of truth that has been considered established.

Furthermore, the dialogue in the narrative of Ki Seno Nugroho's puppet also serves as a tool for the symbolic delegitimisation of the power elite. Figures such as Druna and Sengkuni are consistently constructed as representing manipulation, provocation, and social dysfunction. They not only serve as antagonists in the storyline, but also as symbols of the practice of power that deviates from the values of justice and truth. Through this representation, the puppet narrative indirectly collapses the moral legitimacy of the elite, while shifting the authority of truth into the hands of marginal actors such as Punokawan. This process of delegitimisation is important because it shows that social criticism in puppetry does not stop at a descriptive level,

but moves towards a reconstruction of meaning about who has the right to be the source of truth in society. Thus, dialogue in puppet performances serves as a discursive instrument that not only reflects social reality but also actively shapes the audience's perspective on power structures and the values that underlie them.

Digital Adaptation: From Traditional Narratives to Algorithmic Resonance

Digitisation is not only changing the medium but also the logic of narrative production and distribution. The findings show that:

- The narrative becomes more dense and focused (*compact package*)
- Humour is strengthened as an engagement strategy
- Actual issues (crises, hoaxes, social conflicts) are integrated into the story

Interestingly, the popularity of videos (high viewership) suggests that this narrative works through what can be called "algorithmic resonance", i.e., when traditional cultural content adapts to the distribution logic of digital platforms. In other words, Punokawan not only speaks to the public, but also "negotiates" with algorithms. The transformation of wayang kulit into a digital medium has significant implications for its structure and narrative strategies. One of the most prominent changes is the narrative's tendency to become denser and more focused, a tendency in the puppet tradition known as *compact puppetry*. If, in the conventional format, a puppet show can last overnight with a long, layered plot, then in the digital context, the duration is reduced to a few hours, or even less, without losing the essence of the story. This compaction is not just a technical adjustment but also a communicative strategy that accounts for the characteristics of digital audiences, who tend to have shorter attention spans and prefer content that is directly at the heart of the problem.

In addition, humour has strengthened its function as an *engagement* strategy. In Ki Seno Nugroho's performance, humour is not only an element of entertainment but also the main tool for maintaining audience involvement while conveying social criticism. The higher intensity of humour in the digital version indicates an awareness of the logic of new media consumption, in which entertaining content is more likely to be watched, shared, and discussed. Thus, humour plays a dual role: as a rhetorical tool for conveying critical messages and as a strategy for increasing content visibility in the digital ecosystem.

Furthermore, the narrative of puppetry in the digital medium also demonstrates strong adaptability to real-world issues. Themes such as social crises, the spread of hoaxes, political conflicts, and societal disharmony are integrated into the storyline so that puppets no longer reproduce classic stories but become a direct reflection of contemporary reality. The integration of these issues strengthens puppetry's relevance in modern society while affirming its role as a contextual medium for social criticism. Interestingly, the high number of viewers for these videos shows that the narrative of digital puppets not only survives but also works effectively in what can be termed "algorithmic resonance". This concept refers to the ability of traditional cultural content to adapt to the distribution logic of digital platforms, in which visibility is determined by user interaction, viewing duration, and engagement level. In this context, puppets not only negotiate with the audience, but also with the platform's algorithms. The success in reaching millions of viewers indicates that the narrative built through story compacting, humour amplification, and the integration of real issues can leverage digital curation mechanisms. Thus, wayang kulit in the digital era undergoes not only a transformation of form but also a transformation of the logic of meaning production and distribution.

CONCLUSION

This research produced several key findings that show a significant transformation in the function and narrative structure of puppet puppets in the digital era. The most important findings show that the figure of Punokawan has been repositioned from a mere complementary element to a central actor in the production of meaning and social criticism. The criticism conveyed is no longer linear but multidirectional, flowing from the bottom up, horizontally, and even internally, indicating social reflexivity in the narrative. In addition, this study found a consistent narrative pattern in the form of *a scapegoating mechanism*, in which people are constructed as victims of the elite's failure, as well as the emergence of symbolic delegitimation of power through dialogue. Another important finding is the emergence of "algorithmic resonance", the ability of puppet narratives to adapt to the distribution logic of digital platforms, enabling them to reach a much wider audience without losing the substance of their criticism. Academically, this study not only confirms previous findings on the flexibility and adaptability of puppetry as a cultural medium but also offers a new perspective on narratology and digital communication. First, this study expands the actuarial model by showing that marginal actors can be central to the production of meaning and moral legitimacy in narrative structures.

Second, this study introduces an integrative concept that links traditional narratives and the logic of digital platforms through the idea of "algorithmic resonance," which shows that a narrative's success is determined not only by the text's internal structure but also by the mechanisms of digital distribution. Third, this study emphasises that, in the contemporary context, puppetry functions as a medium of discursive resistance, namely, a space for the production of critical discourse against power, packaged as popular culture. Thus, this research contributes to the development of research on cultural communication, digital media, and narrative analysis in a more contextual and interdisciplinary manner.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the limited sample of four videos meeting certain criteria may not fully represent the overall variation in the digital puppet narrative. Second, focusing research on a single mastermind limits the generalizability of the findings to digital puppetry more broadly. Third, the narrative analysis approach used emphasises the structure and meaning of the text, so it has not empirically examined aspects of audience reception or social impact. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the volume and variety of data, involve other masterminds or channels for comparison, and combine narrative analysis with other approaches, such as reception analysis or digital ethnographic studies. A more comprehensive approach is expected to yield a deeper understanding and support the formulation of cultural policies and strategies to preserve traditional arts in the digital age.

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